



CRITICAL NEEDS ASSESSMENT OF stewart county

The counties included in the Community Assets and Critical Issues Assessment (“CACIA”) are Muscogee, Marion, Harris, Chattahoochee, Stewart, Talbot and Taylor counties in Georgia and Russell County in Alabama. Qualitative information was collected using several different mechanisms during the CACIA. 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 1,913 people in the eight county area at home. All of the qualitative information (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.

This county-level report contains the highlights of the Carl Vinson Institute’s findings for Stewart 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 serves as a companion piece to a lengthy CD data set with tables, graphs, and charts containing 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, and wage information, population growth rate, and non-farm self-employment (measuring small business starts), among others. The following charts provide an overall picture of Stewart 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, Stewart County's child poverty rates followed state and national trends, improving significantly from 1990

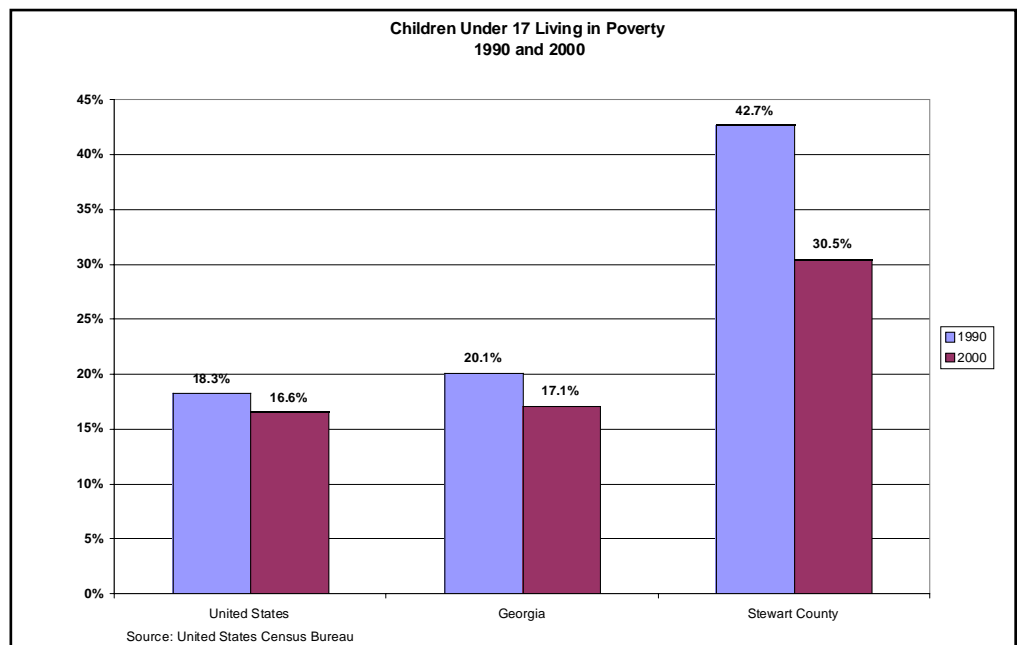
(using 1989 income data) to 2000 (using 1999 income data). Although substantially higher than state (17.1%) and national (16.6%) averages, Stewart County's child poverty rate experienced a more significant rate of decrease from 1990 to 2000 than state and national numbers, dropping 12.2 percentage points to 30.5% in 2000.

Stewart County also fared extremely well in improving its female head of household poverty levels. 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. This was echoed by the Knight Foundation, which stated that "there was a strong correspondence between the prevalence of single-parent households and child poverty rates in the Knight Communities". (John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, *Listening and Learning 2004 - Community Indicator Profiles of Knight Foundation Communities and the Nation.*) Although Stewart County is not one of the Knight Foundation

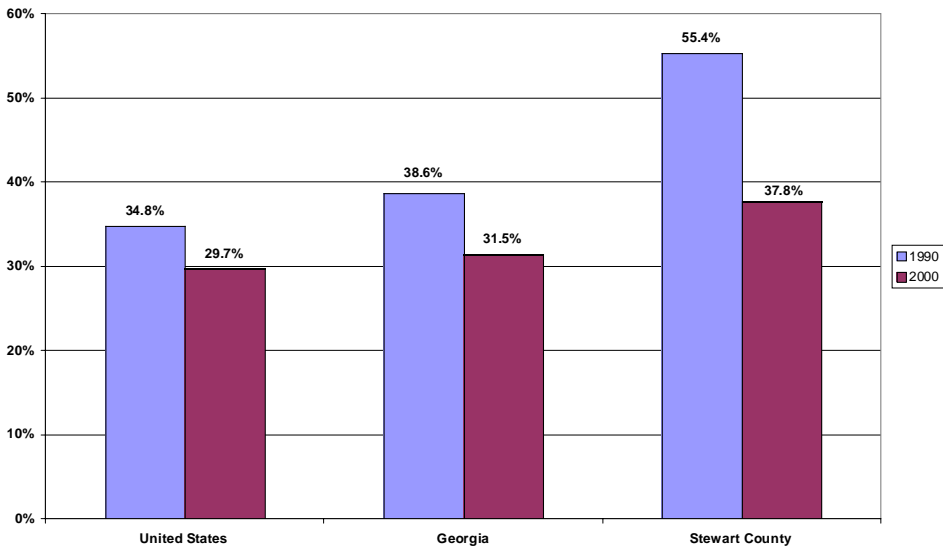
Communities, the findings of the Knight Foundation strongly suggest that there is a direct relationship that exists between the number of single-parent families and child poverty rates within most communities.

While Stewart County's female head of household poverty rates continue to exceed both state and national rates, they declined by a substantive 17.6 percentage points between 1990 and 2000, from 55.4% to 37.8% in the Head of Household Chart.

Educational attainment is another strong indicator of the relative well-being of an area. In 1990, nearly 50% of all adults age 18 and over in Stewart County lacked a high school education. By 2000, the percentage of adults 18 and over lacking a high school education had declined to 37.5%. Although the number of adults possessing a high school education continues to be well below state and national averages, significant progress has been achieved. The impact of area universities and



**Female Head of Household Poverty Rates
1990 and 2000**

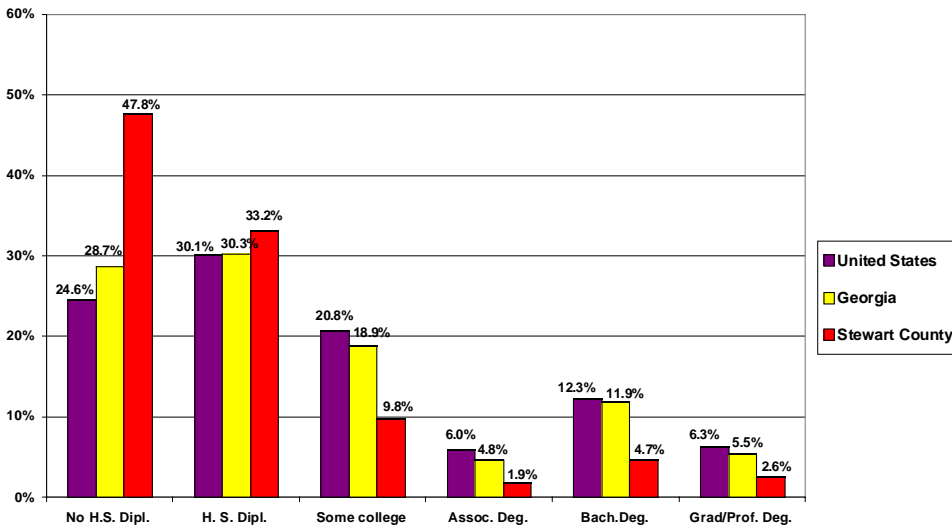


Source: United States Census Bureau

community and technical colleges is also evident, with a 6.5 percentage point increase from 1990 to 2000 in the percentage of residents having completed some college coursework or having attained an Associate's Degree. Gains in the number of residents with Bachelor's degrees or higher levels of educational attainment were modest, advancing only 1 percentage point over the ten year period.

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, Stewart County's per capita personal income (\$21,608) was significantly lower than the state average (\$28,821) and was 70% of the United States average (\$30,906). Of interest is the fact that Stewart County made some progress in closing the gap during 2000-2002, a time of state and national recession.

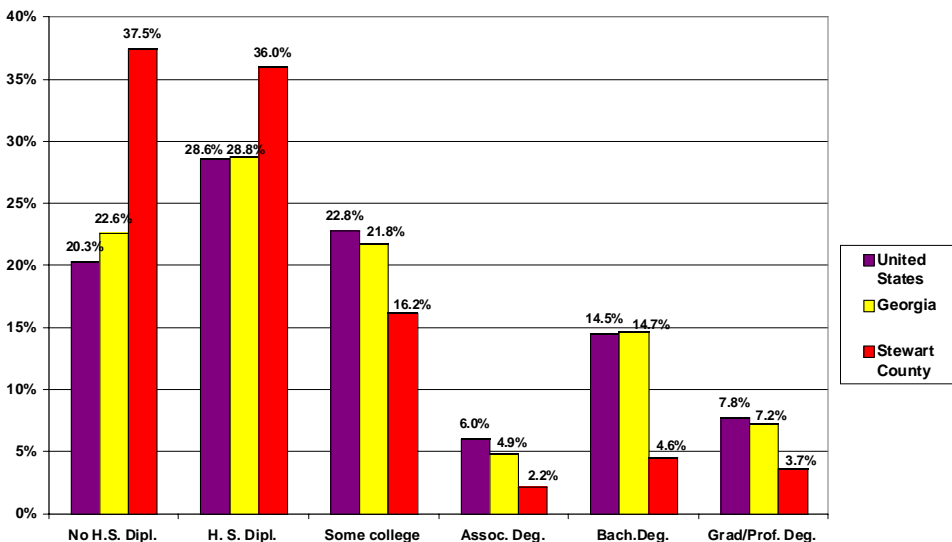
Educational Attainment, 1990, 18 and Over



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

In projecting per capita personal income, the Selig Center for Economic Growth (using US Bureau of Economic Analysis data) is somewhat bullish on the prospects for Stewart County, estimating per capita personal income to increase to between \$27,900 and \$32,810 by 2007.

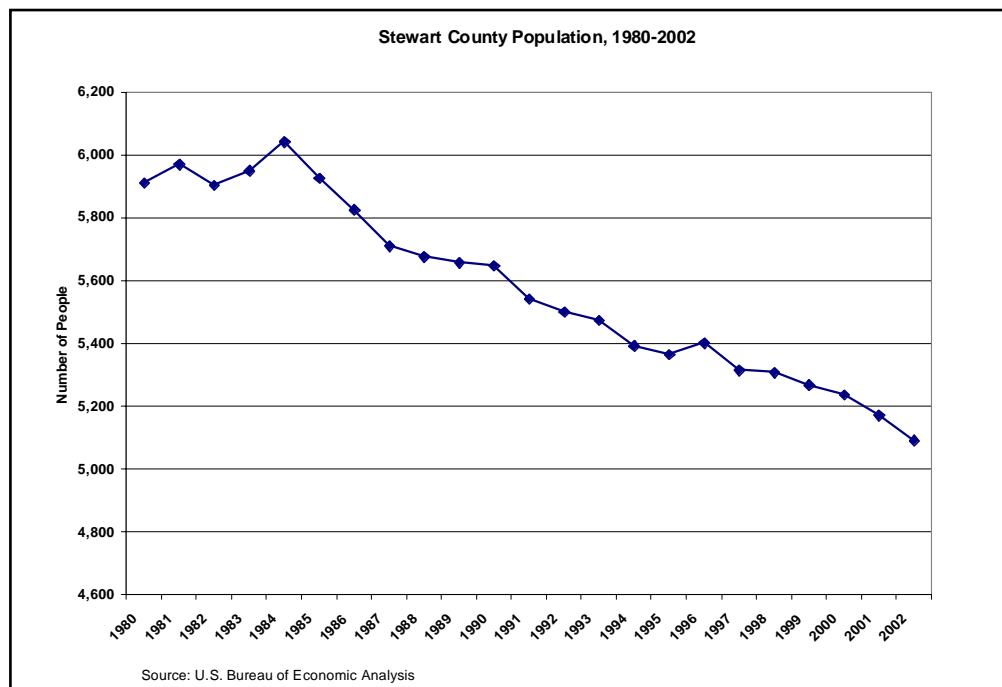
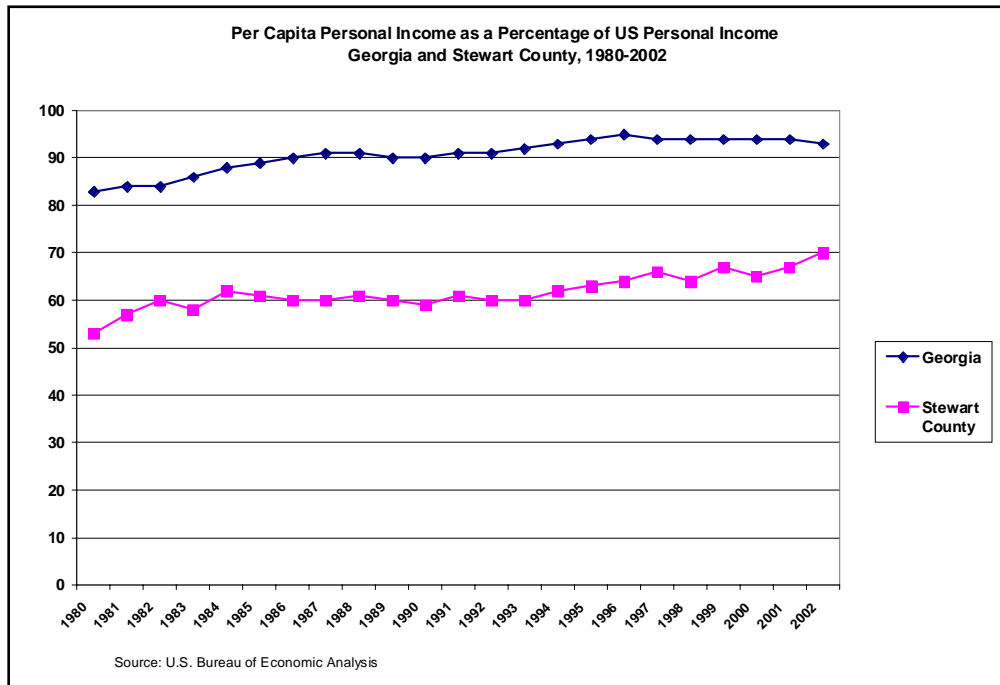
Educational Attainment, 2000, 18 and Over



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

In regard to population growth, Stewart County continues to experience a decline as indicated in the following graph, which illustrates overall population in the County from 1980-2002.

Stewart County continues to experience a population decline

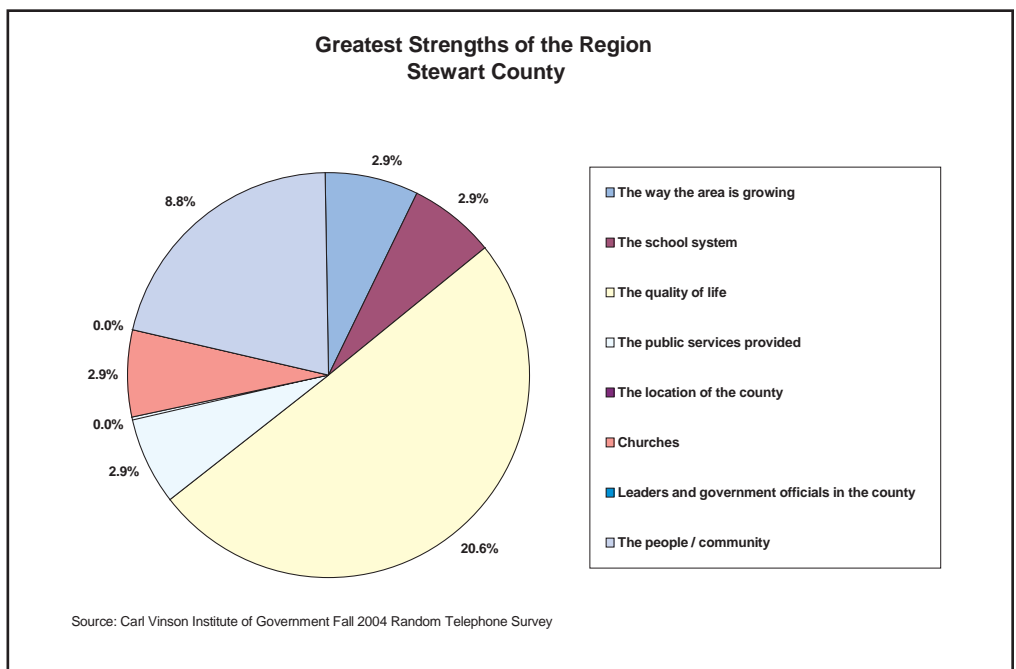
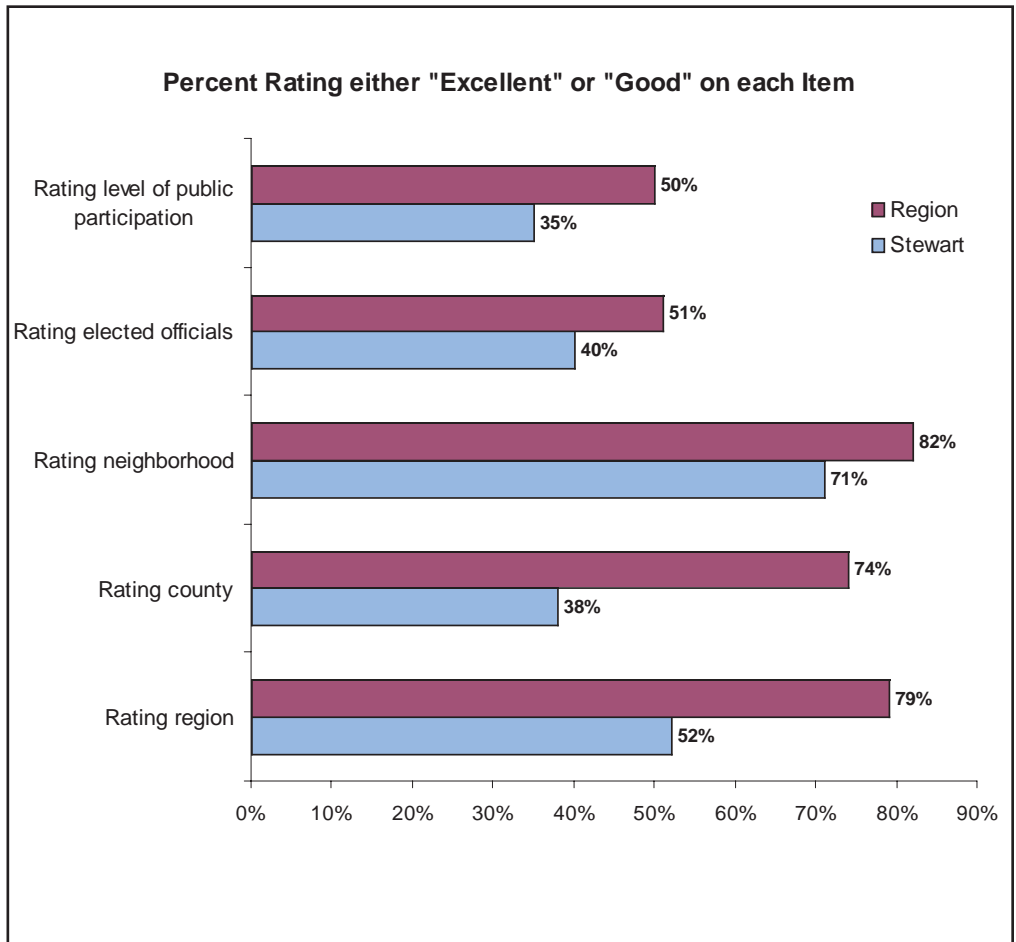


Strengths

Overall, only 52.6% of Stewart County residents ranked the Chattahoochee Valley Region as an “Excellent” or “Good” place to live in the fall 2004 random telephone survey conducted by the Carl Vinson Institute of Government as part of the Community Assets and Critical Issues Assessment. This was the lowest ranking of the eight county assessment area and compared unfavorably to the 79% average for all of the counties. The graph illustrates that Stewart County residents expressed the greatest pride in regard to what they considered to be their immediate “neighborhood” with over 70% indicating a high level of approval.

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 Stewart County. The chart illustrates those strengths that resonated most strongly with Stewart County residents participating in the random telephone survey.

The “quality of life” was identified as the greatest strength of the Region among telephone respondents (20.6%), and they defined quality of life largely in terms of the low cost of living and the quality of the environment. The natural and historic resources of the County emerged as the greatest strength from analysis of all the interviews, e-surveys, and town hall meetings in Stewart County.



As several interviewees noted:

"We have an excellent natural environment that could be utilized to encourage tourism with unique features like Providence Canyon."

[Stewart County Interview].

"The County's location is a considerable strength - we have a small town atmosphere, it's quiet, but we are only 30 minutes away from almost anywhere. Our cost of living is low, and property prices remain reasonable."

[Stewart County Interview].

"We have abundant natural resources and history (Westville, the River, and Providence Canyon). We have abundant

opportunities for development of tourism. We just need to capture the vision and make effective plans to capitalize on these opportunities."

[Stewart County Interview].

The people of the community also were cited as a particular strength, and participants noted that many of the residents of Stewart County had been in the County the majority of their lives and have *"strong ties to this County."* Also frequently discussed was the County's location, which contributes to a strong quality of life while *"just 30 minutes away from almost everywhere one would need to go."*

*Great
natural & historic
resources*



Challenges

The qualitative analysis for Stewart 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 Stewart County:

- :: *The school system*
- :: *Getting people and groups in the County to get along*
- :: *Not enough money for programs and services*
- :: *Drug use, police, safety issues*
- :: *At risk youth, youth programs, parental involvement with youth*
- :: *Differences in the way races are treated*
- :: *Jobs and attracting industry*
- :: *Getting people involved in the community (volunteering, willing to serve in local government)*

The random telephone survey was designed using a series of both open-ended and directed questions. Responses to the telephone survey in Stewart County generally validated these issues, however, they tended to place much greater significance on the issue of creating jobs and attracting industry. This may, in part, 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 a 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 challenges facing Stewart County.

JOBS & CREATING ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

In responding to the telephone survey, 30.3% of Stewart County residents readily identified job creation as the most pressing challenge facing the County when asked the open-ended question, "What do you see as the greatest challenge facing Stewart County?" The percentage of respondents indicating jobs and employment opportunities as the greatest challenge facing the County eclipsed all other responses and paralleled findings identifying this to be the top issue for the entire Chattahoochee Valley Region.

Participants in the town hall meeting, interviews, and e-surveys also identified job creation as a major concern. As one interviewee described the challenge, *"We have low levels of meaningful employment within the County"*. While there was great interest in attracting industry to the County, a significant number of participants cited the natural and historic resources of the County as resources for entrepreneurship and small business development:

"We need to increase tourism and entrepreneurship-creating opportunities outside of working for factories/plants and need to help revitalize downtown/small businesses. Our best prospects for job development are from the inside out."

[Stewart County Interview].

"The saw mills that used to employ so many County residents are gone, and the trailer factory that employed hundreds closed last year. We need more small, local businesses within the area."
[Stewart County Interview].

Data from the Georgia Department of Labor confirm these perceptions. Nearly half of Stewart County's employed workers leave the County each day and commute to another community for work. In 2000, 965 people, representing 51% of Stewart County's employed residents, worked in Stewart County. The largest employers (listed alphabetically in terms of numbers of jobs and excluding government agencies) in Stewart County in the third quarter of 2003 were:

- :: *Flex-Tec, Inc.*
- :: *Four County Health Care LLC*
- :: *Redman Homes, Inc.*
- :: *Stewart Webster Hospital, Inc.*
- :: *Stewart-Webster Rural Health Board, Inc.*

Of the 49% of Stewart County residents who worked in other counties in 2000, 16.9% commuted to Muscogee County, while 7.1% (134 people) commuted to Marion County for work. Smaller numbers of workers commuted to Chattahoochee, Sumter, Webster and Randolph Counties in Georgia, while 78 Stewart County residents commuted to Barbour County, Alabama in 2000.

In terms of workers coming into Stewart County each day, in 2000 166 came from Webster County, 81 from Muscogee County, 63 from

Marion County, 37 from Sumter County, and 23 and 22 people from Chattahoochee and Appling Counties in Georgia. 23 residents of Barbour County, Alabama commuted to Stewart County for work in 2000. The number and diversity of counties drawing residents away from (and bringing people to) Stewart County clearly demonstrates the difficulty in defining the "Chattahoochee Valley Region" by any one set of counties for economic or other purposes. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000)

Comments at the town hall meeting also emphasized the importance of job creation, noting that there was a large pool of workers within the County presently commuting outside of the County due to a lack of employment opportunities in the County.

Telephone survey participants were also asked to rate six issues within their community in terms of perceived problems. The following chart confirms the overall perception that creating and enhancing employment opportunities was deemed to be one of the most critical challenges facing Stewart County today.

On a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the most serious, Stewart County residents rated the need for additional employment opportunities as a 4.20, which was the highest ranking for any of the proposed issue areas.

An integral element of the issue of job creation is the issue of addressing poverty within the County. Seventy percent of Stewart County telephone survey respondents indicated that their community leaders need to spend more time addressing issues relating to poverty.

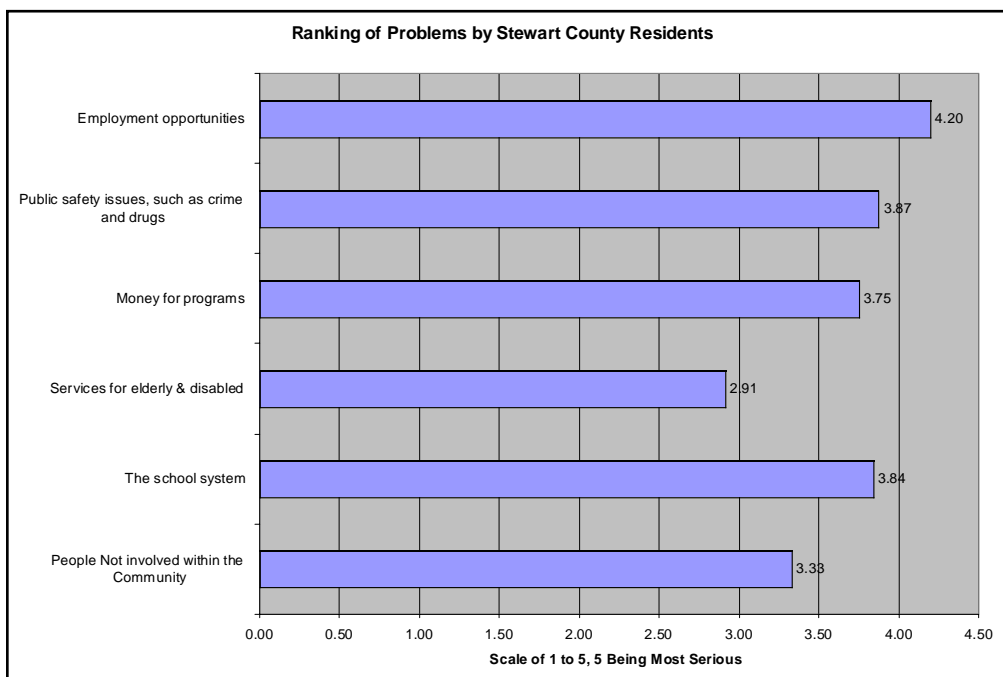
THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

In the qualitative analysis of the town hall meeting, interviews, and e-surveys, it was interesting to note that the school system was identified as both a significant strength and a significant challenge for the County. In the telephone survey, 9.1% of the respondents identified the school system as the greatest challenge, which was significantly lower than the number that identified jobs and economic opportunity as the most significant challenge facing the County. The overall prominence of this issue in the qualitative portion



of the study, along with the high correlation between the health of the public school system and the community's ability to attract industry and create jobs, present a convincing argument that the school system is one of the greatest challenges facing Stewart County. It is also important to note that **78.2% of Stewart County residents who participated in the assessment believe that their leaders needed to spend more time addressing primary and secondary education issues.**

While discussing schools, interviewees and town hall meeting participants discussed problems of the past regarding leadership and lawsuits. However, they were quick to note that new "homegrown" leadership was in place and that there was optimism for school enhancement. Overwhelmingly, there was concern regarding parental involvement in the schools. *"Many of our parents are not involved in promoting education for their kids,"* said one interviewee. *"The problem is not the schools - it's the parents' lack of involvement,"* stated another. Town hall meeting participants emphasized this point repeatedly, indicating that the support of the entire community

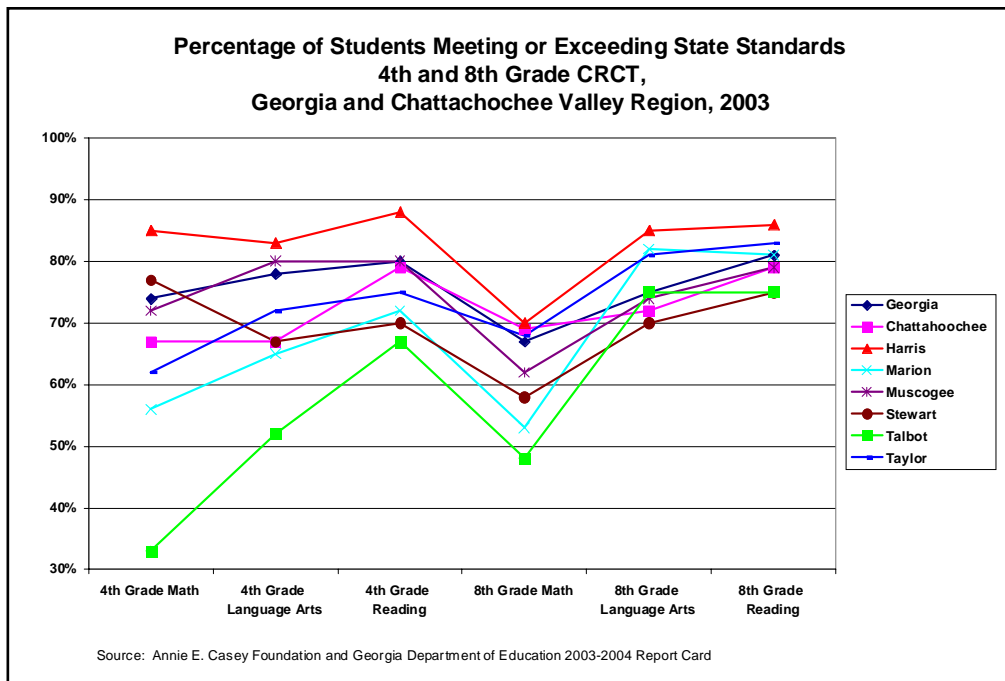
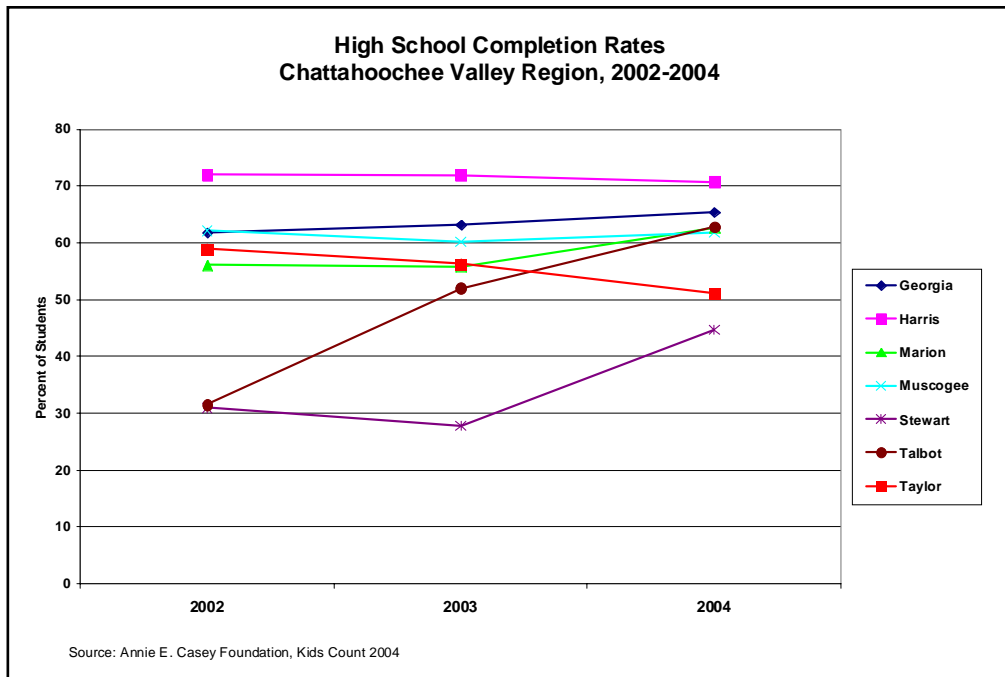


was essential to improving the status of public education within the County.

A review of data regarding the Stewart County School System reveals that the system did not meet the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) Objectives for school year 2003-2004 (Georgia Department of Education's 2004 Adequate Yearly Progress Overview Report). While Stewart County Elementary and Middle Schools met AYP objectives, Stewart-Quitman High School failed to meet objectives for test participation or academic performance. Test participation for the Georgia High School Graduation Test for Mathematics was 91%, falling below the state threshold of 95%. In terms of Academic Performance, 54% of Stewart County students participating in the Georgia High School Graduation Test for Mathematics failed to meet test requirements. Similarly, 41% of Stewart County students completing the Georgia High School Graduation Test in English and Language Arts failed to meet the test requirements.

The School System made significant progress in school year 2004 in regard to school attendance, lowering the percentage of students absent 15 days or more to 10.2% from 17.9% in school year 2003 (Georgia Department of Education 2004 Adequate Yearly Progress Overview Report).

Significant progress was also achieved in regard to the high school completion rate, which rose sharply to 44.7% in school year 2004 from 27.8% in school year 2003 and 30.9% in school year 2002. Despite these increases, the graduation rate for Stewart County continues to be well below the state average of 65.4% (Governor's Office



of Student Achievement's 2003-2004 Annual Report Card.

Student performance on the SAT examination also improved in school year 2004 for students graduating from Stewart-Quitman High School, with an average score of 866, which was higher than the previous year's average of 792. Again, despite the improvements, the County's average scores continue to lag those of the state (981) and the nation (1017), according to Governor's Office of Student Achievement's 2003-2004

Annual Report Card.

Performance of Stewart County 4th grade students on Criterion Referenced Competency (CRCT) tests showed the number of students meeting or exceeding the state standards for reading to be at the state average (79%) and just under the state average for language arts (82% vs. 84%). Performance of Stewart County 4th graders on CRCT math tests exceeded the state average (84% vs. 76%) and, along with Harris County (84%), represented

the highest percentage of students meeting or exceeding the state standards for mathematics within the CACIA Region. (Governor's Office of Student Achievement's 2003-2004 Annual Report Card).

Eighth grade performance on CRCT tests revealed that the percentage of students meeting or exceeding the state standards for reading was 89%, which exceeded the state average (84%); this percentage was second only to Harris County (90%) within the CACIA Region. The percentage

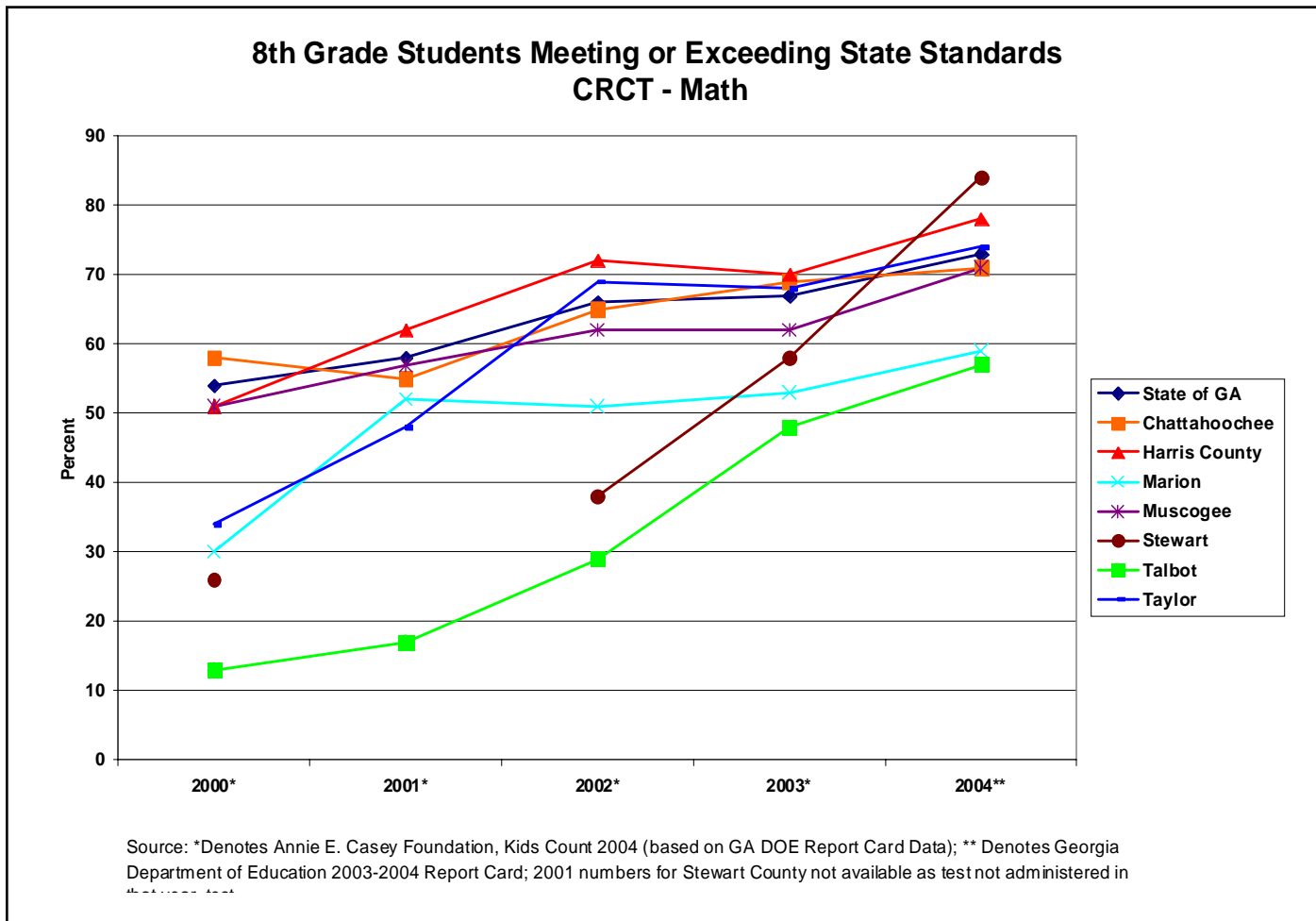
Performance of Stewart County 8th graders in mathematics in 2004 is illustrated in the accompanying graph, which shows that 84% of Stewart County students at this grade level either met or exceeded the state standards in this subject area. This level of performance greatly exceeded the state average (73%) and all other counties within the CACIA Region. (Governor's Office of Student Achievement's 2003-2004 Annual Report Card).

In looking at CRCT performance

expressed by many of the Stewart County CACIA participants regarding the future of public education in the County is well placed, yet there remains much to be done if the County is to develop a better educated populace and a more competitive workforce.

While participants in the CACIA study had expressed both concern and optimism regarding the status of K-12 education within the County, residents participating in the qualitative portion of the study also provided

considerable praise for GED programs conducted within the County and for Columbus Technical College's efforts to provide continuing education opportunities to Stewart County residents.



of students meeting or exceeding the state standards for language arts was 75% which trailed the state average (80%) and that of all other counties in the CACIA region with the exception of Talbot County (74%). (Governor's Office of Student Achievement's 2003-2004 Annual Report Card).

across the 4th and 8th grade levels for Stewart County students, **it is significant to note that 2004 performance exceeded that of the previous four years in each of these basic skills areas (reading, language arts, and mathematics) and was often markedly improved over that of the previous years.** In light of these recent improvements, it would appear that the optimism

PUBLIC SAFETY ISSUES

Preventing crime and illegal drug use was perceived to be a significant challenge facing Stewart County by participants in the random telephone survey. In an open-ended question ("What is the greatest problem

facing Stewart County?"), 15.2% of Stewart County residents indicated that public safety concerns were the most significant issues facing the County. In contrast to some of the other counties within the CACIA Region, the percentage of individuals citing "public safety" as the greatest concern for their respective counties ranged from 19.3% in Taylor County to only 6.4% in Russell County, Alabama.

Public safety issues also ranked highly with Stewart County respondents on several other questions in the random telephone survey. When asked to rank a series of issues on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the most serious problems for the County, the mean response for Stewart County telephone respondents in regard to public safety issues such as crime and drugs was 3.87 out of 5. This figure exceeded all other issues with the exception of employment opportunities as a point of major concern for County respondents.

During the telephone survey, residents were also queried about a number of issues that emerged as priorities during the town hall meeting, personal interviews and e-surveys in Stewart County. One of the questions they were asked was whether community leaders needed to spend more time, less time, or the same amount of time on particular issues. Consistent with the responses above, 77% of Stewart County residents surveyed believe that community leaders need to spend **more time** preventing crime and illegal drug use. While more survey respondents in Talbot County (78.6%) agreed that their community leaders need to spend more time on public safety issues, the Stewart County response exceeded the eight county average of 67%.

Community leaders need to spend more time preventing crime and illegal drug use

In analyzing public safety data for Stewart County, it was revealed that arrest rates in 2003 were 379.92 per 100,000 for all crimes, which places Stewart County 97th of Georgia's 159 counties. It is important to note, however, that the arrest rate for violent crimes per 100,000 people for Stewart County was 589.89, which was the 17th highest rate in the State of Georgia. (Georgia Statistics System, 2004 Georgia County Guide).

The rate of reported property crimes in Stewart County per 100,000 people was 959.81, which was relatively low and placed Stewart County 137th among Georgia's 159 counties. Within the CACIA Region, only Harris County (838.13) and Chattahoochee County (212.07) had lower rates of property crime per 100,000 people. (Georgia Statistics System, 2004 Georgia County Guide).

In expressing concerns regarding public safety, many CACIA participants made reference to juvenile crime within the County:

"In our County, drugs are sold openly on the street, and we desperately need some form of intervention."

[Stewart County Interview].

"We need a recreation area or center to keep our kids busy and out of trouble."

[Stewart County Interview].

Indeed, the juvenile arrest rate in Stewart County in 2002 was 8.2%,

almost twice the Georgia state average of 4.5% (2002 Uniform Crime Reporting Program, Georgia Bureau of Investigation). In 2003, 36.8% of all arrests within Stewart County were juvenile offenders (Georgia Statistics System, 2004 Georgia County Guide), which gave Stewart County the 13th highest ratio of juvenile offenders to overall offenders within the State of Georgia.

CACIA participants frequently cited the lack of constructive activities for youth as a problem within the County, and it appears that the lack of these types of activities may be contributing to the problem of juvenile crime:

"Children in the County have few opportunities to participate in constructive recreational activities; we have few public recreational facilities such as ball fields and lack organized leagues and recreational opportunities."

[Stewart County Interview].

"I have a major concern about how to keep our younger people, Jr. High school ages and up, occupied. The Voyage Club tries to have activities but there is no transportation."

[Stewart County Interview].

"We desperately need public recreation facilities that would benefit our children."

[Stewart County Interview].

"Youth need a place to be active and stay busy. We have more youth on the streets than we do in the school system."

[Stewart County Interview].

OTHER AREAS OF CONCERN

Other issues may not evoke the title of the 'greatest challenge', 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 within their County, they continue to be critical issues and warrant ongoing time and attention.

Community Aesthetics

One such challenge identified in Stewart County was the aesthetics of the community. Participants discussed the need for downtown revitalization and the need for ordinances that would help to alleviate problems with dilapidated mobile homes, junk automobiles, and old machinery:

"Downtown redevelopment is a core issue. We lack the vision to make this happen."

[Stewart County Interview].

"We need a good town 'cleanup' We have ordinances on the books but they are seldom enforced, and parts of our community look very bad."

[Stewart County Interview].

Community Involvement

Participants frequently discussed the need for increased community involvement and leadership:

"Apathy is a problem - some

people are just trying to survive, and others don't care to improve."

[Stewart County Interview].

"Leadership development is a concern. We have a small group of committed leaders. Even when we are able to identify new persons who 'want-to' serve as leaders, the 'know-how' to get things done may not exist."

[Stewart County Interview].



"We attempted to start a Boy Scout program but could not get an ample number of adult volunteers. This is not a problem for parents with the means to take their kids elsewhere, but for the underprivileged it represents a significant problem."

[Stewart County Interview].

Often this topic was framed as the need for increased collaboration, cooperation, and vision within the County in order to better shape the County's future:

"One of our greatest challenges is our mindset. 'We've always done it this way', 'can't attitude', and thinking that the County is 'too small to do something new.'"

[Stewart County Interview].

"There is a lot of division in the County - poor vs. rich, white vs. black. People can't work

together, and the attitudes have not really changed during the past thirty years."

[Stewart County Interview].

"Perhaps the greatest challenge facing Stewart County is mindset. 'We've always done it this way' is a common philosophy, and are we are locked in tradition."

[Stewart County Interview].

"We need to establish unity among our towns-currently it is like the Hatfields and McCoys-much like a feudal system. We have a need for more effective collaboration in order to allow us to use resources more efficiently."

[Stewart County Town Hall Meeting Participant].

While this report focused primarily on the challenges facing Stewart County, the County's strengths, assets and opportunities are numerous. Stewart County's most significant strength may be the determination inherent in its citizens to achieve a bright future. As one interviewee stated:

"We have a deep passion and love for the County and a strong core of residents that are hungry for progress."