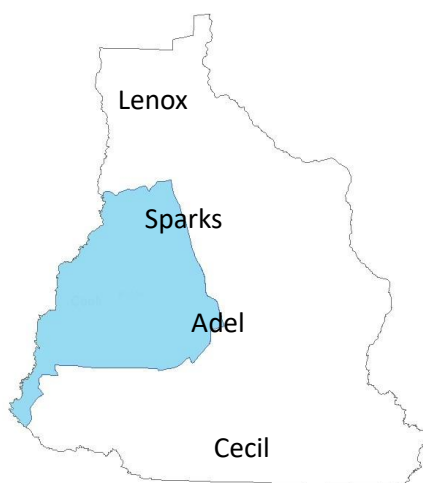
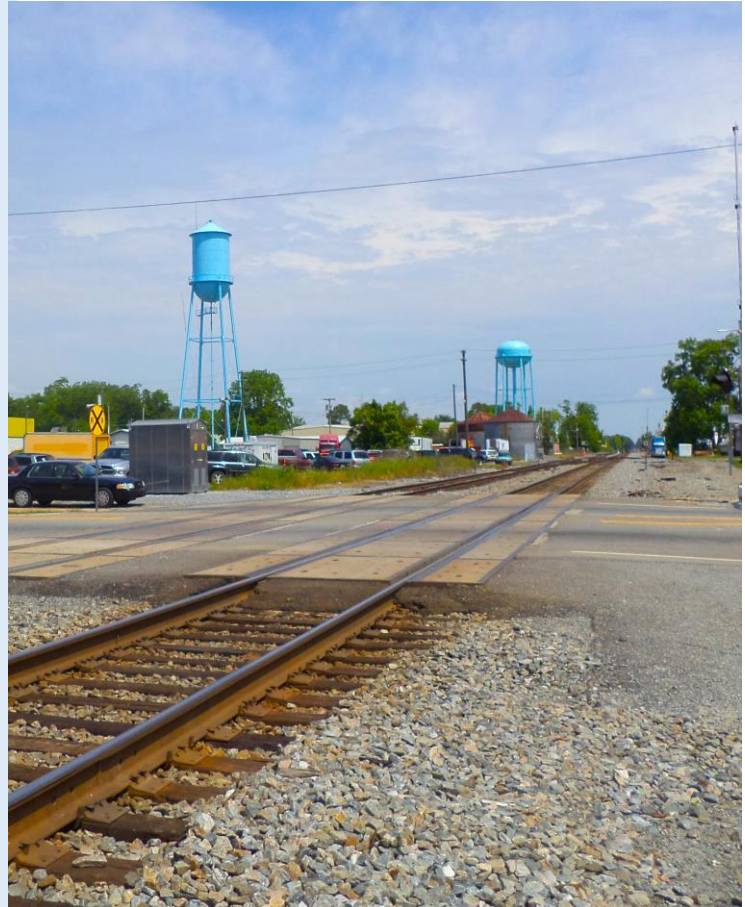


Neighborhood Matters

Factors that Drive Health Outcomes in the Western Tract of Cook County, Georgia 2023

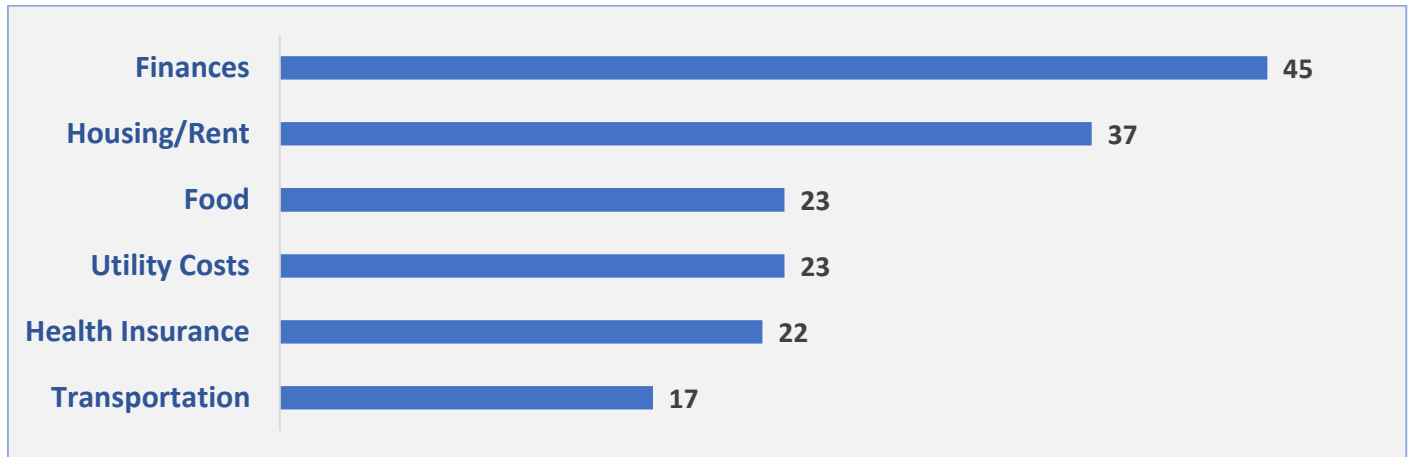
In 2019 Cook County Family Connection received research funding from the Urban Institute to examine the social determinants of health by census tract in eleven rural Georgia counties. As we collected that data for Cook County, it was obvious that the Western Census Tract had much poorer indicators and outcomes than the whole of Cook County. In 2022 we received a research grant from Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to dig deeper into the systems and environments that are driving poorer health outcomes in this part of the community. Through a nine-month process of surveys, focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and windshield surveys, we have collected input from 260 residents and community leaders within the Western Census Tract. It is our hope that this research will shine a light on existing inequities and challenges faced by these residents; and that the findings will generate meaningful discussions and changes that improve their quality of life.

Dr. Chet Ballard and Zoe Myers, MS
Cook County Family Connection

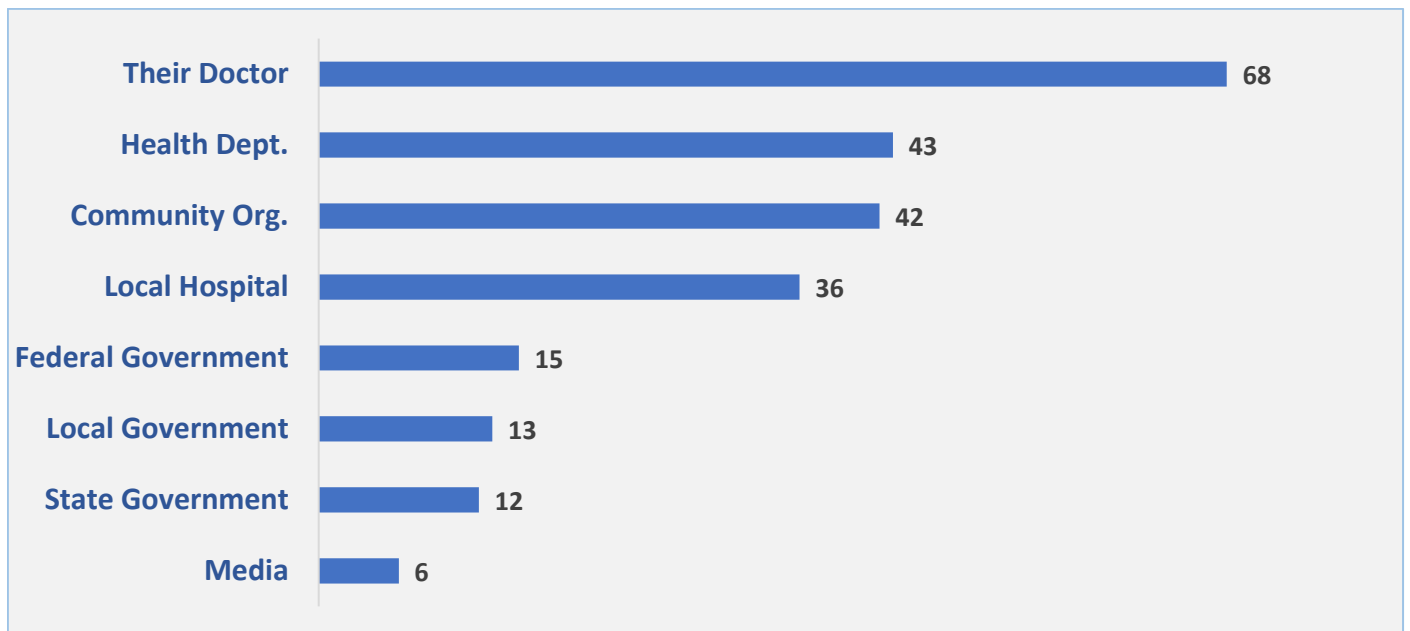


The Western Census Tract of Cook County has a population of 3,572 residents and includes areas of Adel and Sparks west of Highway 41. This area has the highest percentage of Black and Hispanic residents (49.5) and the lowest median income (\$32,311). Compared to county averages, this tract has higher rates of child poverty, single-parent families, high-school dropouts, and children not enrolled in preschool. The percentage of idle teens who are not in school or not working (36.5) is more than double the county average. More than one of every four residents (27 percent) has less than a high school education, and only nine percent of residents earned a bachelor's degree. The average life expectancy is 73 years—four years less than the Georgia average.

As part of our research, we administered the CDC Well-Being Survey to 149 residents in the Western Census Tract. Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 87 and the majority of respondents (62%) are people of color. Over 90 percent of respondents ranked their overall financial situation as poor, and 20 percent ranked their overall quality of life as poor. The data chart below reports percentages when asked about their immediate personal needs:



Trusted relationships are a critical component in the overall wellness of a community. Residents will listen, respond, and collaborate with people, organizations, or institutions that they trust. The following chart reflects the percentage of survey respondents who indicated their level of trust toward certain groups:



"There are lots of people who have to ride bicycles or walk everywhere they go because there is no bus or taxi. There was a taxi service here awhile back but it was so expensive that nobody could afford to use it. People, especially those of us who are elderly and cannot drive, need some way to get around that is affordable so we can go to the grocery store, the doctor, and to run errands." (an elderly resident)

During our focus group discussions and key informant interviews, we began by asking residents to share the good and positive aspects of their neighborhoods. Several recurring themes emerged from those discussions as they described their daily lives within the Western Census Tract:

- Friendly small-town atmosphere
- Familiarity, everyone knows their neighbors
- Situated along a major interstate
- Plenty of fast-food options
- Safer than larger urban cities
- Walmart is easily accessible
- Cook Senior Center offers senior programs
- Family Connection and Community Action Agency provide resources/assistance for residents
- Wiregrass Technical College offers GED/Adult Ed.
- Two grocery stores (Walmart and Piggly Wiggly)
- Dollar stores within walking distance
- Good county-wide school system
- Quality-rated childcare providers



We then asked residents and key leaders to discuss the inequities, challenges, and barriers they face living in the Western Census Tract. Participants were outspoken about their needs and concerns, and the following themes emerged across numerous discussions and interviews:

- Idle unproductive youth roaming the streets
- Abandoned houses, dilapidated buildings, blight
- Shabby appearance: junk, garbage, litter, unkempt
- Drinking, drugs, gambling, deviance on the streets
- Increasing numbers of homeless on the streets
- No emergency room or 24-hour urgent care
- Limited or unreliable ambulance services
- No public transportation, bus, or taxi service
- Lack of affordable decent housing
- Child neglect, unsupervised children
- No youth center or youth programs within walking distance
- A mindset of generational poverty

"There are houses right here on this street where the yards are filled with old cars and appliances and junk. Buildings that are abandoned and houses that are falling down. These places ruin the whole appearance of our community and diminish our pride in our neighborhoods. They're also a safety concern because they draw pests and rodents. We should all work together to show some pride in the place where we live." (a resident)

"We need passionate leaders who will be strong voices for our community and role models who inspire hope. The mindset that you will never amount to anything manifests itself into reality. The only heroes that our youth see on a daily basis are drug dealers and gang leaders. We need community heroes to give them a new hope." (a health leader)

Finally we asked residents and leaders from the Western Census Tract to tell us what is most needed in their community to improve the quality of life for all residents. If money and resources were unlimited, what changes do they envision in terms of systems, structures, and environments that would improve overall health outcomes:

- Youth programs within walking distance
- A community center or gathering space
- Beautification and improved appearance
- 24-hour urgent care or an emergency room
- Available and affordable housing
- Affordable utilities/electric bills
- Homeless services and/or a shelter
- Public transportation or taxi services
- Addiction and mental health programs
- Solutions for drug trade, gang activity, crime
- Engage youth in GED, job skills training, etc.
- Parenting programs to curb child neglect/abuse
- New health systems, mobile clinics, home visits
- Community leadership, advocate voices



"An emergency room or 24-hour urgent care is a real need in our community, especially for us who are older and live in outlying areas. Ambulances are limited so if you have an emergency health crisis, you have to wait until an ambulance is in this area or try to drive yourself thirty miles to Valdosta or Tifton. That is a real fear for many of us." (a social service worker)

"This area is overrun with drug problems; drugs being bought and sold on the streets; and lots of young people selling drugs instead of going to school, learning a trade, or getting a job. These problems are complicated by the fact that there is no real leadership; no one really cares what is actually happening here. Leaders are apathetic and indifferent but we need leaders who care and will work for solutions." (an elected official)

This brief research summary captures only the highlights of the nine-month study conducted by Cook County Family Connection. If you would like additional information, detailed data analysis, participant comments, or discussion summaries, please contact us at (229) 549-7976 or email zmyers@cookcountyfamilyconnection.org. Our research investigators (Dr. Chet Ballard and Zoe Myers, MS) are available to present virtual or in-person presentations of the findings to your organization, agency, church, or community group upon request.