



# Chautauqua County Community Needs Assessment 2026

Chautauqua Opportunities, Inc.  
Chautauqua Opportunities for Development, Inc.



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This Community Needs Assessment is the result of many hours of data collection and review by the staff and management of Chautauqua Opportunities, Inc. We extend our sincere appreciation to the countless individuals and agencies who participated in the information gathering process, either through direct communication or online resources. Contributors include local government agencies and other community providers, COI's Board of Directors, customers, and other members of the community. Thank you to all who participated.

## MISSION STATEMENTS

### **Chautauqua Opportunities, Inc.**

...leading the fight against poverty by mobilizing resources and creating partnerships to promote empowerment, economic independence, and opportunities.

*Helping People ... Changing Lives.*

### **Chautauqua Opportunities for Development, Inc.**

...leading the fight against poverty by mobilizing resources and creating partnerships to promote and create economic independence through business development opportunities.

*Helping Businesses ... Creating Opportunities.*

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# Introduction

## Agency Profile

Chautauqua Opportunities, Inc. (COI) is a not-for-profit Community Action Agency dedicated to serving low- and moderate-income residents throughout Chautauqua County, New York. Established in 1965 as part of the national War on Poverty initiative, COI has been at the forefront of efforts to empower individuals, strengthen families, and build stronger communities. In 2025, the agency proudly marked its 60th anniversary of delivering innovative programs and critical services that address the causes and effects of poverty and promote long-term self-sufficiency. COI's affiliate corporation, Chautauqua Opportunities for Development, Inc. (CODI) was formed in 2002 to provide new and existing small businesses with technical assistance and access to financing. COI and CODI serve about 3,000 households annually.

COI has implemented a comprehensive, asset-focused anti-poverty model that is evidence-based. Each customer household's situation is assessed at intake using a Family Development Matrix that has been confirmed



Chautauqua County Map. (2026) <https://uscountymaps.com/chautauqua-county-map-new-york/#Topographic-Map>

for validity and reliability by the University at Buffalo Center Program Evaluation Center. The Matrices assess households across 26 life domains that include housing, education, income, employment, physical health, mental health, childcare, and others. These assessments are the basis for the development of a life plan with short-term and long-term goals that will lead the household toward self-sufficiency. All COI services for which the household is eligible are included in the plan, in addition to referrals to external services that will help them achieve their goals. Subsequent assessments are compared to the baseline assessment to measure progress, and the plan is continually updated as households achieve milestones toward their goals. The Family Development Matrix is based on the ROMA model of service delivery (Results Oriented Management and Accountability).

The agency uses a Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) process that includes feedback from both internal and external sources. Surveys are collected from each customer after accessing services. Space is provided for any comments or opinions customers may wish to give. Results of the CQI process play an integral role in strategic planning and self-assessment. Rating topics include waiting times, confidentiality, experience with the service accessed, experience with COI in general, how well the service met the customer's needs, how fairly they were treated, how well staff explained the service, and staff response time. Surveys are compiled and reviewed quarterly, and an action plan is developed for any area that falls below an 85% satisfaction rating. For the 2024-2025 fiscal year, at least 97.6% of customers rated each criterion as either "Satisfactory" or "Excellent". The full CQI Annual Reports are available on the agency's website.

## County Profile

Chautauqua County, NY is a primarily rural county in the southwestern corner of New York State that borders Lake Erie, the counties of Erie and Cattaraugus in NY, and the State of Pennsylvania. The two Cities of Dunkirk and Jamestown sit at the northern and southern ends, separated by smaller towns and villages. Chautauqua County is one of fourteen NY State counties that form the upper boundary of the Appalachian Region, an area recognized by the federal government as having high rates of poverty and fewer economic opportunities than other areas of the country.

The county is rich in natural resources that beautify the landscape and draw visitors to recreational opportunities such as boating in the summer and skiing in the winter. Much of the geographic area is characterized by agricultural land that supports livestock and dairy farms, as well as a wide variety of fruits and vegetables. The manufacturing base, while not as robust as the industrial environment of the past, still exists mainly in the more urbanized areas. In addition to manufacturing, the majority of jobs are in the educational, health care, social services, and retail sectors. Educational institutions in the county offer undergraduate and advanced degrees, as well as certificate and trade programs.

## Poverty

While many residents of Chautauqua County enjoy financial stability, a significant portion of the population continues to face serious economic challenges that hinder their ability to achieve a high quality of life. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019–2023 American Community Survey, 17.0% of individuals in Chautauqua County (21,557 individuals) live below the poverty level. This rate exceeds the New York State average of 13.7%, underscoring that Chautauqua County faces greater economic hardship than the state overall.

According to the 2025 Federal Poverty Guidelines, a household of four earning \$32,150 or less annually is considered to be living in poverty. However, many individuals and families earn just above this threshold and still struggle to meet their basic needs. In Chautauqua County, an estimated 6,848 individuals fall between 100% and 125% of the poverty level, with annual incomes ranging from \$32,150 to \$40,187 for a family of four.

These poverty thresholds are based on a bare-minimum budget that does not account for essential but often high-cost expenses such as childcare, health care, transportation, and housing, all of which can significantly impact a household's financial stability. As a result, many residents fall into the category of the "working poor" — individuals who are employed but whose earnings are insufficient to achieve true self-sufficiency. Too often, their incomes exceed eligibility limits for public assistance programs, yet fall short of covering even the most basic household necessities.

A more accurate picture of household financial need can be found using the Living Wage Calculator developed by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Unlike the federal poverty threshold, which is based on a decades-old formula, the Living Wage Calculator factors in actual costs for basic necessities that include housing, food, transportation, child care, health care, and taxes, while accounting for geographic variation.

In Chautauqua County, a family of two adults and two children (ages 4 and 9) would need both adults to work full time and each earn at least \$26.10 per hour to meet basic needs without public assistance. This equates to a household income of approximately \$108,576 annually—more than three times the federal poverty threshold for a family of four.



For a single adult with no children, the living wage in Chautauqua County is \$19.92 per hour, or around \$41,440 annually. This is significantly higher than both the current New York State minimum wage of \$16.00 per hour and the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour, illustrating the substantial gap between minimum wage earnings and actual cost-of-living requirements.

Low wages and a sluggish economy in Chautauqua County continue to strain available resources and public assistance programs. According to the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA), there were an average of 2,208 Temporary Assistance (public assistance) cases per month in 2024, serving a total of 4,052 recipients—a 9.1% increase over 2023. During the same period, Temporary Assistance expenditures rose by 20.7%, from \$14.1 million to just over \$17 million. Additionally, more than 23,000 residents in over 13,000 households rely on Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits to afford food. The Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) also plays a critical role, with 16,436 benefits totaling \$6.9 million authorized during the 2023–2024 federal fiscal year to help low-income residents heat their homes. Funding cuts to these essential programs by the federal government would have a devastating impact on vulnerable populations both locally and across the nation.

As of this writing, federally funded programs are facing a number of challenges under the current administration, largely driven by proposed funding cuts, increased scrutiny over how federal dollars are used, and ongoing uncertainty in the budget process. Reduced funding can lead to fewer services, longer waitlists, stricter eligibility requirements, or the elimination of programs altogether, limiting access to healthcare, housing assistance, food support, childcare, workforce development, and behavioral health services. For beneficiaries, this often translates into increased financial stress, unmet health and mental health needs, housing instability, and reduced opportunities to improve economic self-sufficiency. Vulnerable populations - including low-income households, seniors, people with disabilities, children, and rural communities - are typically affected most, as they have fewer alternatives when services are scaled back. Over time, these cuts can deepen inequities, shift costs to local governments and nonprofits, and increase demand for emergency services, ultimately undermining community well-being and long-term outcomes.

Many programs that are a lifeline for Chautauqua County's most vulnerable residents are currently dealing with reduced or threatened funding levels, delays in grant approvals and reimbursements, and additional administrative requirements that slow implementation and strain staff capacity. Shifts in policy priorities and executive actions have also led to paused or restructured programs, sometimes resulting in legal disputes and confusion at the state and local level. Combined with periodic budget standoffs and the risk of government shutdowns, these issues make long-term planning difficult and create instability for agencies and organizations that rely on federal support to deliver services.

1p0 Poverty can affect anyone. A sudden life event such as job loss, divorce, illness, or the death of a loved one can quickly destabilize a household and lead to long-term financial hardship. These crises often create ripple effects, jeopardizing housing, employment, and access to essential needs. The stress and anxiety caused by financial insecurity can significantly impact both mental and physical health, compounding the difficulties faced by those living in or near poverty. Chautauqua County has subpopulations of elderly and disabled residents in higher concentrations than state averages. These individuals often face further challenges related to their ability to be financially stable and may have limited access to services. making them especially vulnerable during times of crisis. Significant reductions in federal



funding have a direct and often immediate impact on the individuals and families who rely on these programs for basic stability and support.

#### Purpose of the Community Needs Assessment

Chautauqua Opportunities, Inc. conducts a Community Needs Assessment every three years as part of its ongoing management and strategic planning processes. This assessment examines multiple aspects of life in Chautauqua County to better understand residents' needs and identify gaps in available services. The findings serve as the foundation for the agency's Strategic Plan, helping ensure that COI continues to fulfill its mission of supporting low-income and vulnerable populations. It is our hope that it will be useful to other agencies as well in guiding strategies to respond to needs and conditions in Chautauqua County over the next three years.

#### Priority Needs

Each chapter of this document concludes with several recommendations for addressing the needs of Chautauqua County's most vulnerable residents. COI will prioritize the following needed services over the next 3 years.

- Expanding mental health crisis support services.
- Developing parenting education services that teach appropriate discipline, quality family engagement, and emotional coping skills.
- Developing additional affordable housing units.

#### Methodology

COI's 2026 Community Needs Assessment uses data from a wide variety of local, regional, state, and federal sources to develop an analysis of socio-economic trends in housing, employment, health, transportation, technology, childcare, and youth. COI staff members worked in groups to collect and analyze the quantitative and qualitative data pertaining to the chapter to which they were assigned. They used the information gathered to summarize the strengths and challenges associated with each chapter topic, and to make recommendations for improvement. In addition to quantitative data, this assessment has also captured qualitative data through surveys of county residents (Appendix I), input from COI's Board of Directors (Appendix II), as well as through quarterly Community Council sessions (Appendix III) that provide insight into specific needs and community perceptions. In some sections, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has been used to summarize data or clearly articulate information.

This Community Needs Assessment explores both the strengths and challenges that relate to the complex issue of poverty in Chautauqua County. The chapters that follow provide an analysis of the conditions that exist in Chautauqua County that impact the ability of its residents to be self-sustaining and economically secure. Data is provided for many of the factors that come into play for helping people out of poverty, as well as comparisons with state and regional averages.

## POPULATION AND POVERTY ESTIMATES

### Population Estimates, Chautauqua County

	Number	Percent
<b>Total Population</b>	126,329	
<b>Gender</b>		
Males	62,696	49.6
Females	63,633	50.4
<b>Race</b>		
<b>One Race</b>	<b>123,748</b>	<b>97.0</b>
White	110,294	87.3
Black/African American	3,384	2.7
American Indian/Alaskan Native	358	0.3
Asian	815	0.6
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	70	0.1
Some other race	3,195	3.6
<b>Two or More Races</b>	<b>4,581</b>	<b>5.4</b>
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Hispanic (of any race)	11,792	9.3

### Population by Age, Chautauqua County

	#	%
<b>Age Groups</b>		
Under 5 Years	6,686	5.3
5 to 9	7,447	5.9
10 to 14	7,331	5.8
15 to 19	8,484	6.7
20 to 24	7,854	6.2
25 to 34	14,170	11.2
35 to 44	14,181	11.2
45 to 54	14,960	11.8
55 to 59	8,953	7.1
60 to 64	9,788	7.7
65 to 74	15,738	12.5
75 to 84	7,368	5.8
85 and over	3,369	2.7

Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2019-2023 American Community Survey

### Percent of Population at Specific Levels of Poverty

	Less Than 50% of Poverty Line	Less Than 100% of Poverty Line	Less than 125% of Poverty Line
<b>Total Population</b>	7.7	17.0	22.4
<b>By Gender</b>			
Males	7.4	15.7	20.5
Females	7.9	18.3	24.3
<b>By Age</b>			
Under 18 years	9.7	23.1	32.1
18 to 64 years	8.4	17.4	21.8
65 years and over	3.6	10.1	14.6
<b>By Race</b>			
One Race			
White	6.9	15.6	20.5
Black/African American	10.7	30.6	40.8
American Indian/Alaskan Native	11.9	17.8	53.1
Asian	8.8	21.9	23.4
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.0	35.7	35.7
Some other race	14.8	25.8	35.2
Two or More Races	13.2	28.1	36.6
<b>Ethnicity</b>			
Hispanic (of any race)	15.4	36.4	42.2
White alone, not Hispanic or Latino	6.7	14.5	19.5

# 1. Economic Development and Employment

## INTRODUCTION

The foundation of any community's well-being lies in the strength of its local economy. When jobs are abundant and local consumer spending is strong, communities may experience growth and reduced poverty. Conversely, economic downturns can stall hiring, discourage investment, and give rise to new challenges. In Chautauqua County, the economy reflects both progress and struggle—some industries have seen significant growth, while others continue to face setbacks. Employment trends mirror this balance - while new jobs have emerged in certain sectors, limited opportunities remain a persistent challenge in other sectors, especially for young workers.

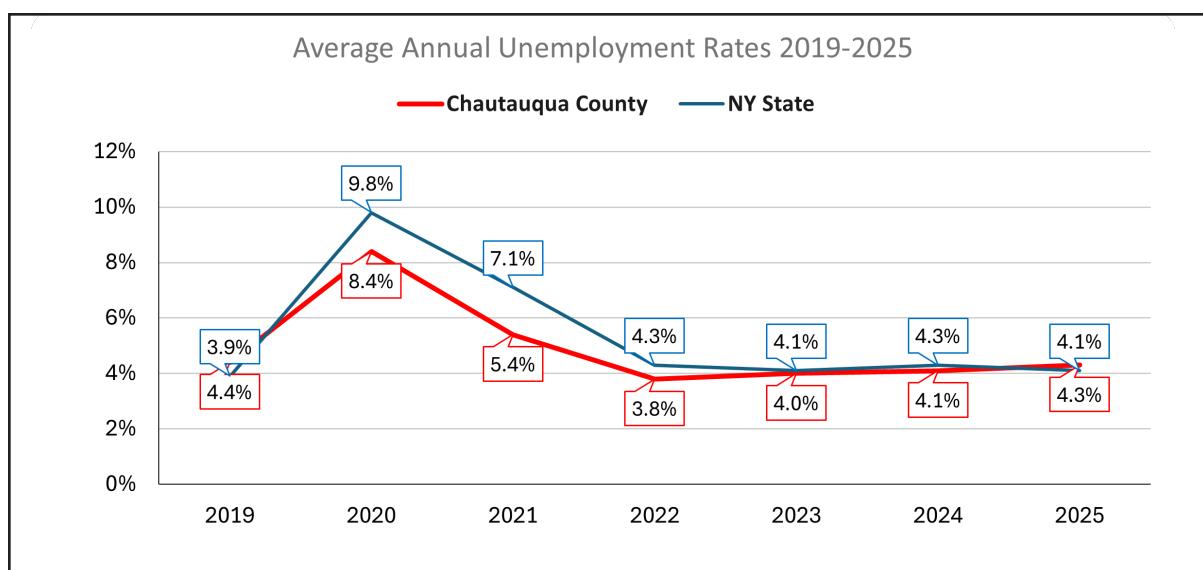
## DEMOGRAPHICS AND STATISTICS

The population in Chautauqua County that is age 16 and over totals 103,384, per the U.S. Census Bureau's 2023 American Community Survey (ACS). The county has a 55.6% labor force participation rate, which is the percentage of this population in the labor force (57,477). Census data indicate that 87.9% of Chautauqua County's labor force works within the county, 7% work in another NYS county, and 5.0% work in another state. The average commute time for all workers who do not work from home is 19.3 minutes.

Many of those who work or are able to work, however, do not work full-time positions. According to the U.S. Census ACS, 53.2% of all people ages 16 to 64 usually worked 35 or more hours per week, 15.0% worked between 15 and 34 hours per week, 4.4% worked between 1 and 14 hours per week, and 27.4% did not work at all.

Unemployment rates for the county and the state declined steadily in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, returning to near pre-pandemic levels by 2022, as illustrated in the NYS Department of Labor data shown in **Chart 1.1**. Since that time, the average annual unemployment rate for the county has increased only slightly each year from a low of 3.8% in 2022 to 4.3% in July 2025. County rates hovered just below the NYS unemployment rates from 2020 through 2024, but rose slightly above the state rate of 4.1% in 2025.

*Chart 1.1 Unemployment Rates*



Incomes in Chautauqua County are well below those of the U.S. and New York State. The median household income in Chautauqua County in 2023 was \$56,507, compared to the median household income for NY State of \$84,578 and \$78,538 for the nation.

**Table 1.1** uses 2023 ACS data (adjusted for inflation) to illustrate the percentage of households in Chautauqua County by income range for family households and non-family households.

*Table 1.1 Percent of Households in Chautauqua County by Income*

	All Households	Family Households	Non-Family Households
Total number of households	53,602	31,6137	21,965
Annual Income:			
< \$10,000	6.3%	3.7%	11.1%
\$10,000 - \$14,999	5.6%	2.1%	10.9%
\$15,000 - \$24,999	9.9%	5.5%	16.5%
\$25,000 - \$34,999	9.8%	7.8%	13.7%
\$35,000 - \$49,999	12.7%	11.4%	15.5%
\$50,000 - \$74,999	18.0%	18.5%	17.0%
\$75,000 - \$99,999	12.9%	16.4%	7.0%
\$100,000 - \$149,999	14.6%	20.2%	5.1%
\$150,000 - \$199,999	5.8%	8.1%	1.8%
> \$200,000	4.4%	6.5%	1.4%

### Industry

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Chautauqua County had a total of 2,695 employer establishments in 2023, which is a drop from the 3,112 in 2021. These employer establishments provided 53,400 total jobs in Chautauqua County, an increase from 44,705 in 2021. As of 2023, the largest industries in Chautauqua County by numbers of employees are: Health Care and Social Assistance (9,133), Manufacturing (8,433), and Educational Services (6,756). The county has seen an increase in numbers of employees in both the Health Care and Social Assistance and Educational Services sectors.

Manufacturing, which has historically been one of the largest industries in the county, has seen recent changes that have reduced the workforce. Major employers in this sector include Cummins, Inc. Jamestown Engine Plant, Bush Industries furniture manufacturer, Nestle Purina pet food, Weber-Knapp hardware and motion control device manufacturer, SKF Aeroengine manufacturer of high precision ball and roller bearings, and TitanX Engine Cooling.

In 2022, Fieldbrook Farms, a subsidiary of Wells Enterprises, laid off nearly 320 employees at its ice cream plant in Dunkirk. In late 2024, the Observer reported that Wells would be adding 133,000 square feet to their facility to increase production. This would add 20 additional jobs and retain the 388 positions that were maintained. Wells Enterprises is the third largest manufacturer of ice cream in the nation.

Organizations such as the Chautauqua County Chamber of Commerce, the County of Chautauqua Industrial Development Agency, the Small Business Development Center, Chautauqua Opportunities for Development, Inc., and the Manufacturer's Association of the Southern Tier provide guidance and support for individuals hoping to start a new business and promote economic strength and networking in Chautauqua County.

The WNY P-TECH STEM College & Career Academy, located in Dunkirk, offers a project-based, differentiated learning culture with specialized educators working in tandem with higher education, business partners and school districts. Students work to earn NYS Regents diplomas and A.A.S. Degrees in Mechatronics, Welding Technology, or Mechanical

Technology with specialization in CADD or machine tool from Jamestown Community College.

According to the Census of Agriculture, Chautauqua County continues to see growth in agriculture. From 2017-2022, there was a 5% increase in the number of farms. The highest sales are for crops are fruits, tree nuts and berries, followed by grains, oil seeds, dry beans and dry peas. For livestock, poultry and products, the highest yield is from milk from cows, followed by cattle and calves. According to the NYS Comptroller, Chautauqua County ranks 3rd in the state for sales of fruit, tree nuts and berries, which can be tied directly to the large grape industry, which continues to be particularly prominent in Chautauqua County.



According to the Chautauqua Chamber of Commerce, the county's proximity to Lake Erie provides a fertile climate for about 872 growers that produce 150,000 tons or more of grapes, which are processed locally for juice, wine, jellies, and other products that are sold worldwide. It is estimated that the grape industry in the Lake Erie Grape Belt region supports about 2,000 direct jobs and over 5,000 jobs in fruit and vegetable processing, with a total economic impact of over \$349 million to the region.

Chautauqua County is situated in the center of Lake Erie Wine Country with over 20,000 acres of vineyards and several wineries located along the shoreline of Lake Erie. In fact, Chautauqua County is the largest U.S. grape-cultivating

region east of the Rockies and the largest global Concord growing region. The region is also home to the Grape Discovery Center in Westfield, NY, the official Visitor's Center for the Lake Erie Concord Grape Belt.

### Tourism

Tourism continues to be a significant economic driver in New York State, with a record 306.3 million visitors in 2023. Chautauqua County plays a vital role in this growth, offering premier attractions such as Chautauqua Institution, the Lake Erie Wine Trail, and the National Comedy Center.

To further stimulate tourism-related economic development, Chautauqua County utilizes a 5% occupancy ("bed") tax on lodging. The tax is split into two funds:

- 3% Tourism Development Fund – Supports the creation and expansion of tourism-related events, programs, and attractions. Grants from this fund are available to businesses, landowners, government entities, and nonprofit organizations.
- 2% Waterways Fund – Dedicated to the enhancement and protection of the county's lakes and streams, contributing to the long-term sustainability of local natural resources.

Together, these initiatives help strengthen the county's tourism economy while preserving its natural assets.

New statewide wetland regulations affecting areas like Chautauqua Lake have sparked mixed reactions. Environmental groups such as The Nature Conservancy support stronger protections for freshwater wetlands. However, some local municipalities have raised concerns about the potential negative impacts on property owners, tourism, and the local economy.

Chautauqua Institution remains a central pillar of Chautauqua County's tourism economy. Each summer season, approximately 7,500 residents stay on the grounds, and over 100,000 people attend public events, reinforcing the Institution's status as a premier cultural and educational destination.

The National Comedy Center, located in Jamestown, is a nonprofit cultural institution dedicated to educating the public on the comedic arts and honoring influential figures in comedy. With over 50 interactive exhibits, the Center offers a unique, immersive experience that draws visitors year-round. It also hosts the annual Lucille Ball Comedy Festival every August, attracting more than 15,000 attendees to the area for live performances by established and emerging comedians.

In April 2024, Western New York served as a premier destination for viewing the total solar eclipse. According to New

York State officials, nearly 1 million people traveled to New York for the event, with 45,000 visitors at Niagara Falls State Park alone. This highlights the region's capacity to attract large-scale tourism tied to special natural events.

### TRENDS AND DIRECTIONS

As part of the 2024 New York State Executive Budget, minimum wages are continuing to rise under a multiyear agreement between Governor Hochul and the State Legislature. On January 1, 2026, the minimum wage increased by \$0.50 to \$17.00 per hour in New York City, Long Island, and Westchester County, and to \$16.00 per hour in the rest of the state.

Beginning in 2027, annual increases will be tied to the Consumer Price Index for Urban Wage Earners and Clerical Workers (CPI-W) for the Northeast Region, ensuring the wage keeps pace with inflation. Provisions for an "off-ramp" exist if significant economic or budget challenges arise.

While minimum wage increases can reduce poverty and boost consumer spending, thereby stimulating local economies, they may also create financial pressures for employers, potentially resulting in workforce reductions or slower hiring.

NYS increased the maximum unemployment insurance benefit in October 2025 to \$869 per week. Calculations of unemployment insurance benefits are based on an individual's previous earnings. According to the NYS Department of Labor, about 27% of those who receive benefits will automatically receive the new maximum, and an additional 28% will see increases to their recalculated payments. The maximum benefit has been stalled at \$504 per week for several years due to an Unemployment Insurance Trust Fund Loan, which the state has recently satisfied.

Chautauqua County, through the backing of its Industrial Development Agency, is actively facilitating development by attracting new businesses while promoting the retention and expansion of existing businesses. Incentives which include tax abatements, low interest loans, energy rebates and credits, shovel-ready sites, and a technology incubator, enhance the opportunities for job creation and retention. The Chautauqua County Industrial Development Agency has been successful in creating several 'shovel-ready sites' throughout the region to attract more business and economic opportunity to the county.

Several groups in the county actively promote the area to businesses and individuals. These include the Local Development Corporations in the City of Jamestown and the Village of Westfield, the Chautauqua County Industrial Development Agency, the Chautauqua County Chamber of Commerce, Chautauqua Region Economic Development Corporation, Chautauqua County Partnership for Economic Growth, Chautauqua Opportunities for Development Inc and the Chautauqua County Visitors Bureau. Recent efforts by many of these groups have focused on marketing agri-tourism in the area, including the numerous Farmer's Markets, Lake Erie Wine Country, and the Grape Discovery Center.

Chautauqua Works, with offices in Jamestown and Dunkirk, offers area employers workforce services such as the ability to post job vacancies on the New York State Job Bank, application intake, pre-screening of prospective candidates, training resources, interview space and job fairs. Individuals seeking employment opportunities are provided with various job search websites to better connect them to prospective employers.

The Center of Innovation & Economic Development (CIED), formally known as Fredonia Technology Incubator (FTI), in Dunkirk promotes economic growth by supporting entrepreneurship and the development of new, innovative companies into successful business ventures, with a focus on technology and the arts. Space is provided for start-up and established businesses as well as for educational events such as workshops for aspiring entrepreneurs.

Launch New York, Inc. is a development organization that assists areas of Western New York and Upstate New York. This nonprofit organization helps entrepreneurs succeed with mentoring, funding, and networking. They help entrepreneurs create business plans and walk them through all the stages of business development.

START-UP NY is an incentive program that allows new and expanding businesses to operate tax-free for 10 years on or near eligible university or college campuses, with SUNY at Fredonia and Jamestown Community College among them. Businesses must create new jobs and contribute to the local economy in order to be eligible for incentives, which include



the elimination of state tax liability, the reduction or elimination of an organization tax, and more.

Accredited higher education options in Chautauqua County include the State University of NY at Fredonia and Jamestown Community College (JCC). SUNY Fredonia is a liberal arts university that offers bachelor's and master's degree and advanced certificate programs. SUNY Fredonia is discontinuing its Early Childhood Education Bachelor degree program due to financial challenges and low enrollment. JCC is a SUNY school that offers transferable two-year degree programs and certification courses in over 40 disciplines. JCC announced in 2025 that it is selling its north county extension building, after abandoning plans to move classes to downtown Dunkirk. Jamestown Business College, which was founded in 1886, permanently closed in February 2025, citing challenges with increasing government regulations.

In 2017, New York State implemented the Excelsior Scholarship program that allows individuals with household incomes below \$125,000 to attend a SUNY or CUNY school tuition-free. Recipients must be NY State residents, complete 30 credits per year, be in good academic standing and must agree to reside in NY State following graduation for the length of time they participated in the scholarship program.

Chautauqua County is advancing renewable energy efforts through solar, wind, and the establishment of Electrovaya, a lithium battery manufacturing facility in Jamestown. Set to begin production in early 2026, the facility will run on clean energy and create up to 250 jobs.

On June 12, 2025, the NYS Public Service Commission approved a Certificate of Public Convenience and Necessity for ConnectGen Chautauqua County LLC to develop a 270-MW solar facility with 20-MW battery storage in the Town of Ripley. While the construction date is not yet set, the project is expected to be operational by 2027. Once complete, it will generate enough clean energy to power approximately 40,000 homes and support grid reliability. The project will also bring significant economic benefits, including \$800,000 in annual tax revenue for the Town of Ripley, \$390,000 annually for Ripley and Sherman school districts, and an estimated \$26.8 million over its operational life.

This initiative further solidifies Chautauqua County's role in advancing New York State's transition to renewable energy, bringing both environmental and economic benefits to the region. Some public resistance has been noted around potential negative impacts on property values.

## COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS

### Community Needs Survey

COI's 2025 Community Needs Survey (Appendix I) reveals significant economic challenges facing Chautauqua County residents. Over 44% of survey respondents reported that their income does not meet basic needs, indicating widespread financial insecurity.

With regard to employment, survey takers were asked what the most common barriers are to obtaining or maintaining full-time employment for people in Chautauqua County. The most common responses were childcare (58.85%), lack of transportation (53.85%), and low wages (44.62%). Other common responses included fear of losing public benefits, lack of education or specialist skills, and lack of full-time job opportunities.

Another question revolved around the primary challenges for people who might be interested in establishing a business in Chautauqua County. Lack of startup financing was cited as the primary barrier to launching a business (61.15%), followed by high taxes/fees (53.46%) and poor economic conditions (40.00%).



### Women in Business Focus Group

Chautauqua Opportunities for Development, Inc. (CODI) conducted a focus group in 2025 with local women entrepreneurs and aspiring business owners. The purpose of this session was to better understand the unique challenges, opportunities, and resource needs that women face when starting and growing businesses in Chautauqua

County. The thirteen participants represented a range of industries and stages of business development, from early start-ups to established ventures. They reported barriers that limit their ability to strengthen and expand their businesses. Access to capital was the biggest challenge, with many women noting difficulty in finding and securing loans, grants, or startup funding. Marketing was also brought up as a major hurdle, as limited funds for advertising and promotion make it difficult to attract new customers. Another concern was the lack of affordable workspace and storefronts, which restricts growth opportunities and limits visibility in the community. Several women also emphasized that there are very few grants available for their specific demographic—middle-aged white women with moderate incomes — which often puts them at a disadvantage for traditional assistance programs.

The input from this group both supports and validates the need for more targeted business development programs within the community. Expanding access to financing, mentorship, and tailored training opportunities would not only address the barriers identified by these women but also strengthen the overall small business ecosystem in the region. Their feedback highlights a critical opportunity for local programs and services to bridge existing gaps and create pathways for women entrepreneurs to thrive.

### COI Board of Directors

In group discussions that were held as part of a retreat in 2025 (Appendix II), members of COI's Board of Directors considered the difficulties that local employers have with finding and retaining employees. To address this issue, the members identified a clear need for more employability training and education in financial literacy and basic life skills. Expanding programs that focus on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) is critical, as demand for skills in these areas continues to grow. Local colleges should also continue to work closely with employers to ensure their training programs align with current workforce needs. The Board also discussed the aging workforce and the need for businesses, educational institutions, and community organizations to work together to create a more attractive environment for young workers to stay and thrive.

The Board also discussed some of the biggest challenges facing individuals seeking employment in Chautauqua County. They cited transportation barriers a shortage of full-time job opportunities that pay a living wage. Many job seekers lack the specific skills or credentials that employers require, and some positions demand formal degrees without recognizing relevant life or work experience. Additionally, the high cost of childcare—or the inability to find it at all—can make employment financially unfeasible for parents. Limited opportunities that offer career advancement, along with the difficulty of navigating complex job search and application processes, further hinder residents' ability to secure stable and sustainable employment.

## STRENGTHS

- There are several local development corporations and other groups in the county who continue to promote the area to businesses and individuals.
- The county has natural resources that can be used for energy production, including natural gas and nearly constant winds due to its position along Lake Erie.
- The county's soil and climate are ideal for producing Concord grapes, as well as several varieties of wine grapes. This adds to local food production and tourism in the area, as well as employment opportunities.
- Several organizations exist within Chautauqua County to provide workforce training and human resource development, including SUNY Fredonia's Career Development Office, Jamestown Community College and its Manufacturer Technology Institute, Chautauqua Works, the P-TECH STEM College and Career Academy, and the Chautauqua County Education Coalition. Economic development organizations in the

county also provide education on entrepreneurship

## CHALLENGES

- Employers continue to have difficulty filling positions that require specialized skills or higher education.
- Chautauqua County does not have an adequate number of childcare slots to meet the current demand, which is a major barrier for parents seeking employment.
- Local colleges have recently closed campuses, and SUNY at Fredonia has dropped its Early Education Bachelor's degree program.

## NEEDS / RECOMMENDATIONS

- The community needs more businesses and industries that offer sustainable living wage jobs.
- Employers in the manufacturing sector need a workforce trained in specialized skills.
- Individuals need increased training and education opportunities that are matched to the needs of local employers and that offer higher wages and opportunities for advancement.
- Entrepreneurs need financing capital, support, and training to help them start and grow small businesses.
- Economic Development Corporations should continue to pursue investment in successful industries such as agriculture, tourism, and manufacturing.



# 2. Housing

## INTRODUCTION

For the majority of families, having safe, affordable, and sustainable housing helps form and establish the foundation of their financial, physical, and emotional health. Housing that is unsafe can create both long-term and short-term health issues. Housing that is unaffordable can lead to financial instability, and it often perpetuates the cycle of poverty common to low-income communities. Housing that is unsustainable can lead to emotional distress.

In Chautauqua County, housing presents both opportunities and challenges. Relatively low home values make homeownership affordable to much of the county's population. Since a home is a long-term asset that retains its value over time, the county's homeownership rate of 69.1% bodes well for the financial health of county residents. On the other hand, many renters are struggling with an income that does not adequately cover the cost of housing, which has led to a rise in homelessness throughout the county. An aging housing stock also presents challenges as the cost of repairs is a burden to many residents and the environmental risks of old housing negatively impact residents. Strategies that build off the county's strengths and address these challenges are crucial to improving the housing conditions in Chautauqua County.



## DEMOGRAPHICS AND STATISTICS

### Housing values

Median home values in Chautauqua County are considerably lower than New York State and national home values, as illustrated in **Table 2.1**. In Chautauqua County in 2023, the median home value for owner-occupied units with a mortgage was \$119,300 (per the U.S. Census Bureau ACS 5-year estimates), which is 29.6% of the \$403,000 median home value in NY State and 39.3% of the \$303,400 median value in the U.S.

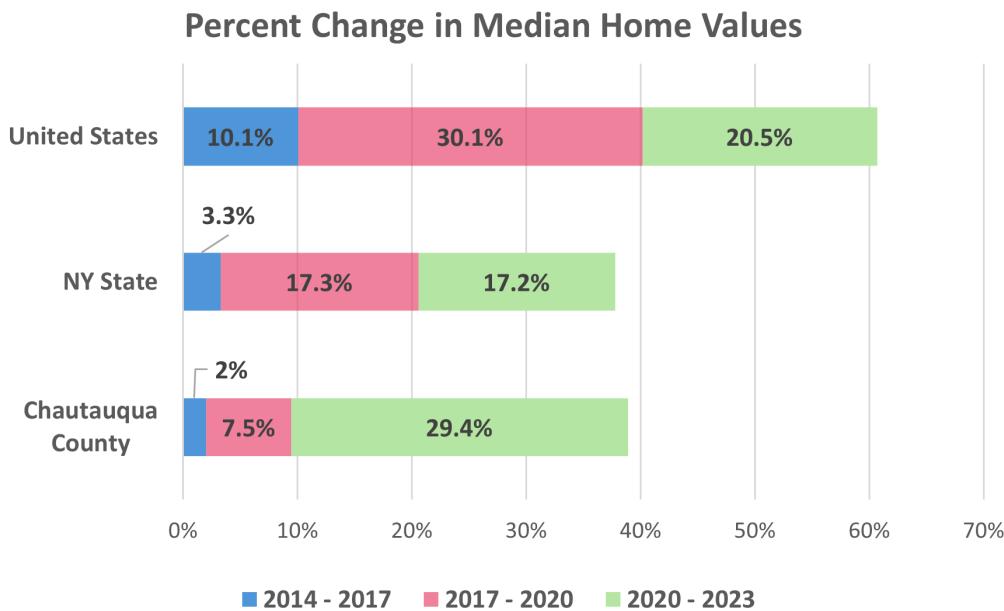
*Table 2.1 Median Home Values*

	Chautauqua County	New York State	United States
2023	\$119,300	\$403,000	\$303,400
2020	\$92,200	\$343,700	\$251,700
2017	\$85,800	\$293,000	\$193,500
2014	\$84,100	\$283,700	\$175,700

Chautauqua County's housing market was sluggish for much of the past decade, but experienced rapid growth after 2020, likely catching up with broader market trends. Despite this recent surge, long-term appreciation remains modest compared with the national rate, suggesting housing affordability remains relatively strong — but also that property wealth accumulation and investment returns have been slower in the county and the state than in many other parts of the U.S.

**Chart 2.1** shows how median home values in Chautauqua County have changed over time compared with New York State and the United States from 2014 to 2023.

Chart 2.1



From 2014–2017, home values in Chautauqua County rose 2.0%, which is slower than both the state (3.3%) and national (10.1%) averages. This suggests relatively stagnant housing demand or weaker economic conditions during this period. Between 2017–2020, growth improved to 7.5% in the county, but still lagged well behind New York (17.3%) and the U.S. (30.1%). This indicates the county's housing market was less affected by the broader pre-pandemic real estate boom seen elsewhere.

From 2020–2023, median home values jumped 29.4% in Chautauqua County, outpacing both New York (17.2%) and the U.S. (20.5%). This reflects a strong pandemic-era surge, likely driven by increased migration to rural areas, low interest rates, and the limited housing supply in the county. Over the full period, the increase in home values in Chautauqua County nearly matched the increase statewide, but both are well below the average increases nationally.

### Homeownership

As seen in **Table 2.2**, homeownership rates are strong in Chautauqua County compared to New York State and even national rates. The county's homeownership rate of 69.1% is higher than the rates for both New York (53.6%) and the Nation (65.9%) per the U.S. Census. The county homeownership rate increased by 0.5% since 2020, while New York State's homeownership rate decreased by 0.5% since 2020.

*Table 2.2 Percentage of Occupied Housing, Homeowner vs Renter*

	Chautauqua County		New York State		United States	
	Owner	Renter	Owner	Renter	Owner	Renter
2023	69.1%	30.9%	53.6%	45.4%	65.9%	34.1%
2020	68.6%	31.4%	54.1%	45.9%	64.4%	35.6%
2017	70.0%	30.0%	54.0%	46.0%	63.8%	36.2%
2014	69.9%	30.1%	53.8%	46.2%	64.4%	35.6%

Rural communities often display higher rates of homeownership than urban areas, and Chautauqua County's homeownership rate of 69.1% is consistent with this pattern. By owning a home, residents have a financial asset that will retain its value if maintained. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the ability of families to



afford housing. Between August 2023 and August 2024, the average interest rate started to decrease, which eased the barrier for first-time homebuyers ([Realtor.com](#), [FreddieMac](#)).

Home prices in Chautauqua County have risen, making it increasingly difficult for many families and individuals to afford homeownership without financial assistance. Several programs are available to help first-time buyers overcome these financial barriers by providing down payment and closing cost support. In 2024, eligible Chautauqua County residents could access assistance through programs such as the Homebuyer Dream Program (HDP), which offers grants for down payment and closing costs through participating banks and credit unions. The City of Dunkirk's Down Payment and Closing Cost Assistance Program also provides grants to help qualified buyers purchase homes

within Dunkirk. Additionally, organizations such as CHRIC and Chautauqua Opportunities, Inc. offer First-Time Homebuyer Education and Counseling, while loan programs like FHA and HomeReady provide alternative financing options to make homeownership more attainable.

### Foreclosure

Tax foreclosure activity in Chautauqua County during 2024 was heavily delayed and suppressed by statewide law changes. In May of 2024, county officials announced that tax foreclosure proceedings were postponed indefinitely, which was a direct response to retroactive changes in tax foreclosure laws in New York State. The county was then required to review and update its internal policies, which put the foreclosure process on hold. Property owners facing foreclosure will have additional time to rectify their property tax obligations.

According to the private equity firm ATTOM, there have been 49 foreclosure filings in Chautauqua County in the first half of 2025. They identify 15 properties in foreclosure and one bank owned property in the last quarter of 2025, with 1.02% of homes "seriously underwater".

Preventing foreclosures helps residents stabilize their housing and maintain any equity they have accrued in their home. Assistance for foreclosure prevention is available from Legal Assistance of Western NY (LAWNY) and from Chautauqua Opportunities, Inc.'s certified Housing Counselors.

### Condition of Housing Stock

Chautauqua County has some of the oldest housing in the State of New York, as well as in the country. According to the U.S. Census 2023 ACS, 38.7% of homes in Chautauqua County were built before 1940, exceeding the average percentage of older housing statewide (29.6%) and in the nation (11.9%). Just 3.0% of the county's housing stock has been built since 2010, a much lower percentage in comparison to the state (6.7%) and the nation (10.1%). In Chautauqua County, 77.4% of homes were built in 1979 or earlier, which is around the time that lead-based paint was determined to be a health hazard and discontinued.

*Table 2.3: Percent of Housing Units by Year Built*

Year Built	Chautauqua County	New York State	United States
<b>2010 or later</b>	3.0%	6.7%	10.1%
<b>1980 to 2009</b>	19.7%	19.8%	39.4%
<b>1940 to 1979</b>	38.7%	44.0%	38.6%
<b>1939 or earlier</b>	38.7%	29.6%	11.9%

## Utility Costs

In Upstate New York, winter temperatures require renters and homeowners to heat their housing for extended periods of time. Most Chautauqua County homes are not very energy efficient due to their age. Low-income renters often live in the oldest housing stock that is the least energy efficient, thereby bearing a disproportionate burden of energy expenses. Since 2019, the cost of electricity has risen by 46.3%, and the cost of natural gas increased by 18.3% as shown in **Table 2.4**. In 2025, multiple global variables have created increases in inflation and energy prices. If this trend continues, subsequent increases could have a significant negative impact, particularly on lower-income households.

*Table 2.4 Average Retail Price for Energy in NY*

	2019	2022	2025
Electric (cents/Kilowatt-hr)	17.3	21.0	25.31
Natural Gas (\$/1,000 cubic ft)	12.24	13.83	14.48

*Source: NYSERDA/U.S. DOE, Energy Information Administration*

## Environmental risks

Chautauqua County's aging housing stock is also more likely to contain environmental hazards. Lead-based paint was used in residential housing until 1978 when it was banned. According to the Census Bureau 2023 ACS, 77.4% of homes in the county were built while lead-based paint was still widely being used. The ingestion of lead-based paint particles by children under 6 is known to have significant negative physiological and developmental impacts. There are no safe levels of lead in the body.

NYS Department of health data indicate that between 2017 and 2019, the rate of elevated blood-lead levels in children who were tested in Chautauqua County was 21.3 per 1,000, compared to 3.8 per 1,000 of tested children across New York State. On October 1, 2019, NYS lowered the threshold for what is considered an elevated blood-lead level in children from >10 mcg/dl to >5 mcg/dl. Preliminary data indicated a substantial increase in reported cases at this new threshold in 2019, as seen in Table 2.4. Significant decreases in elevated blood-lead level rates in children under age 6 have been reported at the county and state level, likely due to aggressive lead remediation efforts.

*Table 2.5 Children under 6 with Elevated Blood Levels*

Children under 6 with Confirmed Elevated Blood-Lead Levels		
(>5 mcg/dl), Rate per 1,000		
	Chautauqua County	New York State
2022	24.2	9.5
2019	40.3	12.1

Radon is the leading cause of lung cancer in non-smokers and the 2nd leading cause of lung cancer in the general population. Radon comes from the breakdown of uranium in soil, rock and water. It occurs naturally in the earth but can become a problem when it builds up indoors. Radon seeps into homes through cracks in the foundation. It easily passes through gravelly soil that is common in Chautauqua County due to its history of glacial activity. Radon is mitigated through a soil depressurization system that uses a fan to draw radon gas from beneath the foundation and vent it safely above the roofline. Sealing foundation cracks also helps improve the system's overall effectiveness.

The New York State Department of Health conducted a study from 1986 to 2007 to determine the percentage of basements with dangerous levels of radon (greater than 4 pCi/L). As radon levels do not change significantly with time, these levels are still considered to be accurate. Results for Chautauqua County indicate that 34% of basements have radon levels of 4 pCi/L or above; 20% of basements have radon levels between 2 and 3.9 pCi/L; and 46% of basements had results under 2 pCi/L. The average indoor radon level nationally is 1.3 pCi/L.

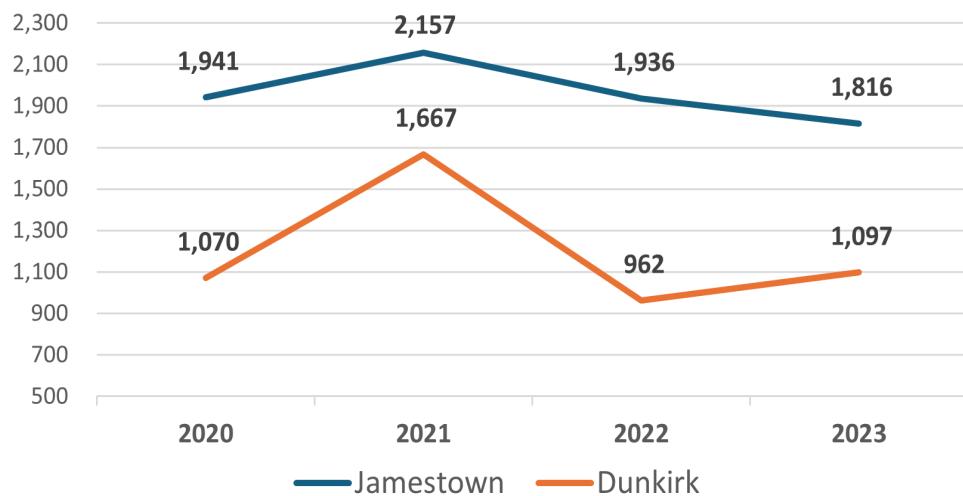
In 2010, several federal agencies took action to protect people and families from radon. The 2010–2016 Federal Radon

Action Plan (FRAP) was an effort to extend the reach, scope, and impact of federal actions on radon. By 2015, eight non-governmental organizations from industry and the not-for-profit sector joined these federal agencies and started the NRAP. This plan is a collaborative effort to reduce avoidable radon-induced lung cancer in the United States. The goal is achieved by radon testing, radon mitigation, and radon-resistant construction.

City Housing Code violations are an indicator of substandard housing and may also indicate the presence of environmental hazards. The number of new code violations that were recorded each year in the Cities of Jamestown and Dunkirk between 2020 and 2023 are illustrated in **Chart 2.2** using information provided by the Code Enforcement Officers of the two cities. Common code violations such as peeling paint and improper storage of trash pose safety and environmental health hazards to the people living in these units.

**Chart 2.2**

### New Code Violations, Jamestown and Dunkirk 2020-2023



#### Rental Affordability

For the majority of households, housing costs are the single highest expense. For lower income households, particularly renters, housing costs can be a disproportionate amount of the household budget. The Department of Housing and Urban Development considers households that pay more than 30% of their income for gross rent to be rent-burdened. Gross rent is the amount of contract rent plus the cost of utilities (if these are paid by the renter). Rent-burdened households can find it challenging to meet other basic needs. They are often unable to effectively build assets and work toward financial mobility because their housing expenses represent such a large percentage of their income.

In Chautauqua County, rent-burdened households make up 47.1% of the rental population. An additional 18.3% of renters pay between 20% and 29.9% of their household income towards their gross rent. The percentage of rent burdened households in Chautauqua County is slightly higher than the national average (46.9%), but lower than the average statewide (48.7%).

*Table 2.6 Percent of Renters by Percent of Income Paid for Gross Rent*

% Household Income Paid for Rent	Percentage of Renters		
	Chautauqua County	New York State	United States
Less than 20%	26.5%	38.4%	23.7%
20.0 - 29.9%	18.3%	21.0%	22.5%
30% or more	47.1%	48.7%	46.9%

## Homelessness

The greatest housing challenges in Chautauqua County are experienced by homeless households. Many homeless persons and families in Chautauqua County are placed in temporary housing by the Department of Social Services, but there has been a significant increase recently in 'visible street homeless' in Chautauqua County, prompting a county-wide Street Outreach Task Force to be formed in late 2024. The homeless population in Chautauqua County tends to include female-headed households, veterans, runaway youth, single men and women, and domestic violence survivors, but homelessness can affect people across age, gender, or racial and ethnic boundaries.

The Chautauqua County Homeless Coalition serves as the HUD Continuum of Care (CoC) for the county. A CoC is a collaboration of housing providers and other organizations who plan and provide resources to address the needs of the homeless. The Chautauqua County Homeless Coalition works to coordinate a continuum of services to prevent and respond to homelessness. Chautauqua Opportunities, Inc. is the lead agency for the Coalition, with membership including housing agencies (Southern Tier Environments for Living, Inc., Recovery Options Made Easy, YWCA of Jamestown, Dunkirk Housing Authority, Evergreen), shelters (UCAN Jamestown City Mission, the Salvation Army Anew Center), community service and relief groups (Community Helping Hands, the American Red Cross, Love INC of Southern Chautauqua County), government agencies (Chautauqua County Department of Health and Human Services, City of Jamestown Department of Development), organizations serving youth or students (Chautauqua County Youth Bureau, Erie-2 Chautauqua Cattaraugus BOCES), and others. The Homeless Coalition is pursuing membership in the NYS Balance of State CoC, which is led by the NYS Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA). Balance of State CoCs typically cover large geographic areas that are primarily rural. The NYS Balance of State CoC covers nine counties.

Information generated from the Chautauqua County Homeless Coalition's Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) reveals there were 912 enrollments in homeless services in Chautauqua County in 2024, an increase from 848 in 2023 and 671 in 2022. Of the 912 enrollments in 2024, 86% of individuals entered services from a situation where they were either literally homeless or at imminent risk of becoming homeless. The tables below provide demographic information about the homeless population in Chautauqua County, as recorded in the HMIS.



Table 2.7 Chautauqua Co. Homeless Population by Gender

Year	2022	2023	2024
Male	45.9%	49.5%	50.1%
Female	43.2%	49.2%	49.1%
Other	1.9%	.3%	.8%
Total	671	848	912

Table 2.8 Chautauqua County Homeless Population by Race and Ethnicity

	2022	2023	2024
White	57.2%	55.5%	39.5%
Black or African American	12.2%	10.3%	6.4%
Other	30.6%	34.2%	54.1%
Hispanic/Latino	21.3%	16.4%	16.4%
Non-Hispanic/Non-Latino	78.7%	83.6%	83.6%

Table 2.9 Veterans enrolled in Homeless Services

Year	2022	2023	2024
Number of Veterans	12	17	18

Youth homelessness continues to be a problem in Chautauqua County. Data from COI's youth programs indicate that youth become homeless primarily because they are asked to leave the home by a parent or caregiver (51.2%), but substantial numbers are homeless because they cannot find a job (24.7%), they experienced physical abuse (23.8%), or their caretaker engages in substance abuse (22.6%). This data has remained consistent over the past several years. Homeless youth in particular are at risk for becoming victims of human trafficking, and every effort should be made to house youth in appropriate shelters when their homelessness becomes apparent. The numbers of homeless youth recorded in the Chautauqua County HMIS are illustrated in **Table 2.10**. Additional information about homeless and at-risk youth can be found in the Youth chapter. Homeless youth are included in the total homeless numbers provided by HMIS in **Tables 2.7 and 2.8**.

Table 2.10 Youth Homelessness

	2022	2023	2024
Unaccompanied youth: Ages 18 and under	101	78	91
Unaccompanied youth: Ages 18-24	24	17	15
Total unaccompanied homeless youth	125	95	106
Homeless youth in a family unit	223	290	315
<b>Total Number of Homeless Youth</b>	<b>348</b>	<b>385</b>	<b>421</b>

## TRENDS AND DIRECTIONS

### Affordable Housing

The decrease in homeownership rates that occurred from 2017 to 2020 in Chautauqua County was largely attributed to the higher sale prices that began during the COVID-19 pandemic. Post pandemic, homeownership rates are again on the rise. While incomes in Chautauqua County are lower than other areas of New York State and the country, an index comparing median income as a percentage of median home values presents a positive picture for the affordability of homeownership in the county.

Median Gross Rents continue to rise in Chautauqua County, as well as the state and the nation. In Chautauqua County, gross rents rose by \$122 between 2020 and 2023, an 18% increase that is significantly higher than the 6.9% increase between 2017 and 2020. Even so, the percentage of rent-burdened households in the county decreased by 2 percentage points from 2020 to 2023, indicating that household income growth outpaced median gross rent increases.

Table 2.11 Trend in Median Gross Rent

	Chautauqua County	New York	United States
2023	\$797	\$1,576	\$1,348
2020	\$675	\$1,315	\$1,096
2017	\$631	\$1,194	\$982

Table 2.12 Trend in Rent-Burdened Households

	Chautauqua County	New York	United States
2023	47.1%	48.7%	46.9%
2020	49.1%	53.2%	53.6%
2017	52.9%	53.5%	50.6%

## Homelessness

The total number of homeless persons or persons at-risk of homelessness recorded in Chautauqua County rose from 671 in 2022 to 912 in 2024. These numbers include homeless individuals who were living on the street, in emergency shelters, in transitional housing, placed in permanent housing, or who were at-risk of homelessness.

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to have an impact on homelessness. From March 2020 to January 2022, New York State maintained a moratorium on residential evictions under the Tenant Safe Harbor Act. During this time period, both the total number of homeless individuals and the length of time homeless individuals stayed in shelter increased. Locally, homeless individuals stayed in local shelters or motels longer due to the lack of available rental units.

Since the end of the eviction moratorium on 01/15/2022, the number of households being evicted continues to increase. During this time period, rental costs have significantly increased, impacting affordability and availability, a trend that continued through 2024.

**Table 2.13** shows the length of time that individuals remained enrolled in programs that provide homeless services, as recorded in the HMIS. Some homeless services, such as emergency shelters, are intended as short-term emergency services, while others, such as permanent supportive housing, are designed for long-term stays. The data suggest that more people are remaining homeless for multiple months, which could be a reflection of an increase in those with co-occurring, complex barriers to maintaining housing.

*Table 2.13 Length of Time Homeless*

	2022	2023	2024
30 days or less	372	408	321
31-60 days	123	202	229
61-90 days	82	112	150
91-180 days	73	85	140
181-365 days	12	39	62
365+ days	9	2	10

Another trend is the heavy reliance on area motels as homeless shelters. While Chautauqua County has homeless shelters that serve specific populations such as women only, men only, youth or domestic violence survivors, there is not nearly enough capacity to meet the need. When there are no beds available to accommodate a homeless person or family, the Chautauqua County Department of Health and Human Services may provide a voucher enabling them to stay in a nearby hotel or motel. This provides temporary shelter but is not ideal for a number of reasons, including the lack of supportive services onsite. It is also more expensive to provide vouchers compared to the cost of placement in a homeless shelter.

The increase in the number of homeless persons has pushed both shelter and motel beds to their capacity. In 2022, three local agencies started work on building new shelter sites. Chautauqua Opportunities, Inc. opened Hope Haven Women's Shelter in Jamestown in March of 2025 with a capacity to serve 18 single women. UCAN Jamestown City Mission, a faith-based organization that operates a shelter for men in the city, is currently in the process of developing a shelter for families. The Salvation Army Anew Center, which serves domestic violence survivors, has plans to develop a second shelter site. These facilities will add capacity to the emergency shelter inventory once all are completed.

The Chautauqua County Homeless Coalition, the City of Jamestown, and the Street Outreach Task Force meet regularly to address the immediate need for emergency shelter, particularly in Jamestown. A series of community meetings have been held to explain the need and request support. The Homeless Coalition conducted a Point in Time (PIT) count in August 2024 using 57 volunteers representing multiple agencies. The PIT count identified 55 individuals who were unhoused or "street homeless". Recovery Options Made Easy (ROME) has established Code Blue overnight warming centers that provide emergency shelter on nights in Winter when the temperature is below freezing.

## Subsidized Housing

Chautauqua County has several affordable housing developers and subsidized housing providers. Subsidies increase

the affordability of rental housing for low-income households. According to standards set by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, households in subsidized housing contribute no more than 30% of their income toward rent. In Chautauqua County, subsidized housing is provided by Public Housing Authorities in the Cities of Jamestown and Dunkirk, privately owned units developed with low-income housing tax credits (LIHTC), and housing vouchers through the Housing Choice Voucher Program (Section 8) that are administered by COI and used in coordination with private landlords. Some of the major subsidized housing projects are Lindwood Apartments, Carroll Manor, Springwood Apartments, Collins Manor, Mayville Senior Apartments, Arrowhead Apartments, Second Street Apartments, Euclid Gardens, Chadakoin Centre Gardens, Fredonia Commons, and Appleyard Terrace Townhomes.

## COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS

The results of COI's 2025 Community Needs Survey (Appendix I) indicated that 62.62% of those who responded own their own homes, 33.98% are renters, and 3.40% were homeless or staying with someone else. These percentages are very similar to the overall rates percentages for Chautauqua County reported by the Census Bureau (69.1% homeowners and 30.9% renters).

The survey results indicate that the most common barriers to homeownership in Chautauqua County center around affordability and financing challenges. The high cost of housing (60.5%) and the inability to save for down payment or closing costs (56.4%) are the top two obstacles, suggesting that even modest price increases or limited savings can prevent many residents from entering the housing market. Additionally, high property taxes (49.4%) and inability to obtain a mortgage (40.3%) further compound these financial barriers. Participants of COI's August 2025 Community Conversations meeting (Appendix III) also cited financial challenges as a major barrier to homeownership, pointing out that poor credit histories make it difficult for people to qualify for a mortgage.

Secondary concerns from survey results include the cost of maintaining a home after purchase (25.1%) and the lack of quality housing for sale (24.3%), both of which indicate that even those able to buy may face challenges in sustaining homeownership or finding suitable options. High interest rates (23.9%) were also a notable factor, reflecting broader economic conditions affecting borrowing costs. Other respondents cited the length of time to close on a property (4.9%) or lack of knowledge about purchasing a home (0.4%). Overall, the data underscore that affordability—both upfront and ongoing—is the most significant hurdle to homeownership in Chautauqua County.

The survey results reveal that affordability and housing quality are the most pressing challenges faced by renters in Chautauqua County. An overwhelming 83.8% of respondents reported that rents are not affordable, making this the top concern. Closely following, 80.0% cited that the quality of available housing is not acceptable, indicating that even when units are within reach financially, many do not meet basic standards for safety, condition, or comfort.

A significant portion of respondents also pointed to limited availability in desired locations (43.1%) and a shortage of units large enough for their households (36.3%), suggesting a mismatch between rental supply and household needs.

Some survey responders (23.8%) reported believing they had experienced discrimination when seeking rental housing. Other potential barriers were pet restrictions (3.1%), credit checks (0.6%), and high security deposits or income requirements (0.6%).

With regard to the problem of homelessness, the survey shows that addressing mental health (51.9%) and housing-related needs, including emergency shelters (43.6%), permanent housing (41.2%), and substance abuse services (40.7%)—are seen as the top priorities for combating homelessness in Chautauqua County. Survey respondents also highlighted outreach (37.5%) and transitional housing (35.0%) to help connect people with resources and provide intermediate support. Fewer prioritized case management (29.6%). Overall, the focus is on mental health, substance use treatment, and stable housing as key solutions. In group discussions about homelessness, COI's Board of Directors



echoed these community perceptions on homelessness (Appendix II). In addition to developing more affordable permanent housing options, the Board cited intensive case management and expanded services and support for mental health, addiction, and domestic violence as essential strategies to combat homelessness in the county.

## STRENGTHS AND OPPORTUNITIES

- Median home values are increasing, which benefits homeowners by increasing their equity in this asset.
- Free or low-cost programs exist to raise awareness of the threat of lead-based paint, assist with lead remediation in housing, and test children for elevated lead blood levels.
- First-time homebuyer programs that offer down payment and closing costs assistance are available to assist low to moderate income households with building assets by purchasing a home.
- Multiple local homeless service providers have received funding to develop new emergency shelters.
- Recent increased community awareness of local street homelessness and available resources has boosted interest in collaborative efforts to solve the problem, including a newly formed Street Outreach Task Force.
- There have been increased state and federal investments in residential energy efficiency, which includes making new energy efficient appliances and mechanical systems available to consumers.

## CHALLENGES

- The county has a high number of rent-burdened households (those who pay more than 30% of their income for housing costs).
- There is not enough rental housing that meets quality standards and is affordable.
- The county has a high percentage of older housing that in many cases include health hazards such as lead-based paint and radon, inefficient energy systems that lead to high utility costs, and other needed repairs that are unaffordable to low-income households.
- Despite recent progress in the development of emergency shelters, the capacity does not meet the increasing demand and there are limited options for certain populations (such as women with children). Placing unhoused individuals and families in motels is not cost efficient and is not ideal for the provision of case management.
- High mortgage interest rates have made homeownership less affordable to first-time buyers.

## NEEDS / RECOMMENDATIONS

- The community needs down payment/closing costs assistance programs and affordable mortgage products that promote homeownership, especially for first-time homebuyers.
- Low-income families and individuals need education about the dangers of environmental health hazards in the home and assistance for remediation of health hazards and housing code violations.
- The community needs more emergency shelter options, especially for homeless families.
- The community needs to develop additional affordable housing units to increase the supply of quality housing that meets the demand.

- Low-income households need subsidized services to support energy efficiency.
- Homeowners and renters need education on fair housing laws, including the process for filing fair housing complaints and information about the rights of tenants and landlords.
- Homeowners and renters need financial education that includes of budgeting for housing costs to prevent foreclosure or eviction.
- Grassroots initiatives to establish neighborhood standards and support neighborhood improvements should be encouraged.



# 3. Health

## INTRODUCTION

Chautauqua County, like most of the state and the nation, continues to have high rates of chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, and chronic respiratory disease, which often lead to death. Chronic diseases can be preventable and have been linked to unhealthy risk factors such as poor nutrition, lack of exercise, and the use of tobacco products. Substance abuse continues to be a problem in the county, which manifests in high rates of binge drinking, alcohol-related vehicle accidents, and newborns affected by narcotics at higher rates than statewide averages. Substance abuse among the unhoused population in the county is often paired with co-occurring mental illness, creating challenges for providers. Government, nonprofit, and other service providers are coming together in a collaborative approach to address these issues holistically.



## DEMOGRAPHICS AND STATISTICS

### Leading Causes of Death

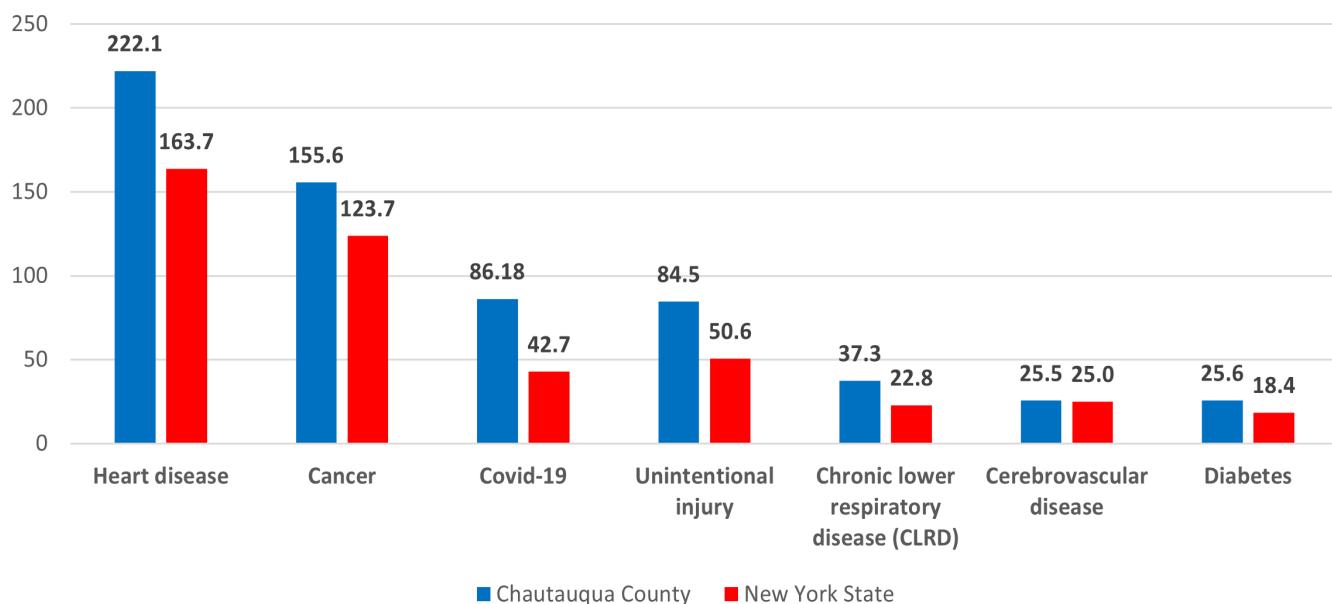
The top seven causes of death in Chautauqua County and New York State are illustrated in **Table 3.1**, using data from the NYS Department of Health for 2022. Heart disease and cancer have consistently been the leading causes of death in the county since at least 2013. Deaths from unintentional injuries include drug overdoses, motor vehicle accidents, and falls.

The leading causes of death in the county mirror those of NY State, although Chronic lower respiratory disease (CLRD) and cerebrovascular disease switch places in rank between county and state.

*Table 3.1 Leading Causes of Death, Number of Deaths 2022*

	Chautauqua County		New York State	
	Rank	Number of Deaths 2022	Rank	Number of Deaths 2022
Heart Disease	1st	413	1st	43,166
Cancer	2nd	297	2nd	32,584
Covid-19	3rd	108	3rd	11,174
Unintentional Injury	4th	106	4th	10,920
Chronic Lower Respiratory Disease (CLRD)	5th	73	6th	6,052
Cerebrovascular Disease	6th	50	5th	6,574
Diabetes	7th	46	7th	4,762

As seen in Chart 3.1, for every one of the seven leading causes of death, Chautauqua County's death rates (per 100,000 population) are higher than the statewide rates. Covid-19 and unintentional injuries were much more deadly (about double the state rate) in Chautauqua County in 2022.

Chart 3.1 *Leading Cause of Death, Rates of Death per 100,000 Residents, 2022*

### Risk Factors

Key risk factors for heart disease include high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and smoking. Age, family history, and lifestyle factors (smoking, alcohol consumption, diet, physical activity) are key risk factors for developing cancer, with the most common forms being prostate, breast (females), lung/bronchus, and colon/rectum.

Obesity is a serious, common and costly chronic disease, and a risk factor for developing other preventable diseases. Obesity is prevalent in 2 in 5 adults in the United States, 1 in 3 adults in NYS, and 35.6% of adults in Chautauqua County. An estimated 1 in 5 children in NYS are obese, which has tripled since the 1970's.

Data below provided by the NYS Department of Health for 2021-2023 illustrates the prevalence of overweight and obesity among Chautauqua County residents in comparison to NY State averages.

Table 3.2 *Prevalence of Obesity and Related Factors*

	Chautauqua County	New York State
Adults who are overweight (BMI 25-29.9)	33.3%	34.3%
Adults who are obese (BMI 30 or higher)	33.5%	29.2%
Adults who are overweight or obese	66.8%	63.5%
Adults who report consuming no fruits or vegetables daily	33.7%	34.2%
Adults participating in leisure time physical activity, past 30 days	77.8%	74.6%
Adults with physician diagnosed diabetes	13.3%	10.2%
Overweight students in elementary school	18.2%	16.3%
Obese students in elementary school	25.2%	19.8%
Elementary students either overweight or obese	43.4%	36.1%

Low physical activity reduces energy expenditure and weakens cardiovascular, metabolic, and musculoskeletal health, which contributes to weight gain, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, insulin resistance, and poor circulation. Together, these factors greatly raise the risk of heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and stroke — the same conditions that are leading causes of death in Chautauqua County and throughout the state.

Eating ultra-processed foods and having low physical activity are major lifestyle risk factors that contribute to many of

the leading causes of death seen in Chautauqua County. Ultra-processed foods (like packaged snacks, sugary drinks, fast food, and processed meats) are typically high in added sugars, unhealthy fats, sodium, and refined carbs but low in fiber and nutrients. Regular consumption increases the risk of obesity, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, certain cancers, and early death.

Chronic Lower Respiratory Disease (CLRD) risk factors include smoking, air pollution, allergens, and occupational exposures. In Chautauqua County, many residents work in manufacturing and agriculture, which both carry significant health risks. Manufacturing jobs expose workers to dust, fumes, solvents, and industrial chemicals that can damage the lungs and increase the risk of CLRD, cancer, and other chronic illnesses, while heavy lifting and use of machinery raise injury risk. Agricultural work on dairy farms, crop fields, and vineyards involves exposure to organic dusts, mold, pesticides, and animal dander that can trigger chronic respiratory diseases, and frequent use of heavy equipment and vehicles increases the likelihood of serious accidents.

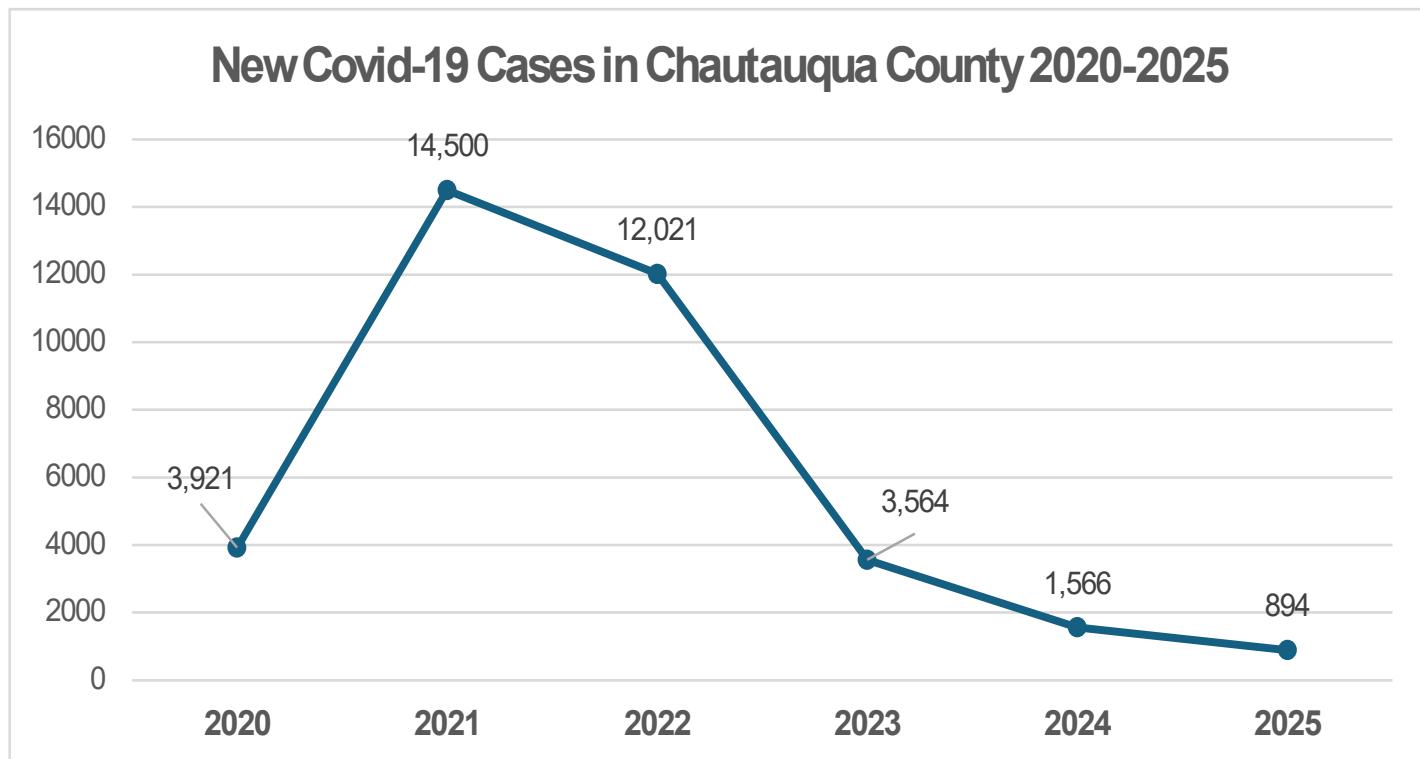
Cigarette smoking continues to be the leading risk factor in causing preventable death in the United States. In NY, smoking and secondhand smoke kill over 22,000 people each year. According to the NYS Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS), Chautauqua County is 1 of the top 5 counties for smoking rates at 23.6%, compared to the state average of 12.0%. The BRFSS defines a smoker as an adult, 18 years of age or older, who has smoked at least 100 cigarettes in their lifetime and currently smokes at least some days.

Social Determinants of Health (SDOH) are factors that influence a person's health status and well-being outside of their medical care, which encompasses the conditions in which people are born, grown, work, live, worship and age. SDOHs have an impact on people's health, well-being and quality of life. Studies and research show that SDOH have a greater influence on health than genetics or access to healthcare services. Examples include economic stability and access to affordable housing, quality education, and social support networks.

### Covid-19

Rates of Covid-19 decreased dramatically since 2021 when 283 deaths were reported in the county, largely due to preventive measures put in place and the availability of a vaccine. New cases of Covid-19 reported to the NYS Department of Health for the past five years are shown in **Chart 3.2**.

*Chart 3.2 New Covid-19 Cases in Chautauqua County 2020-2025*



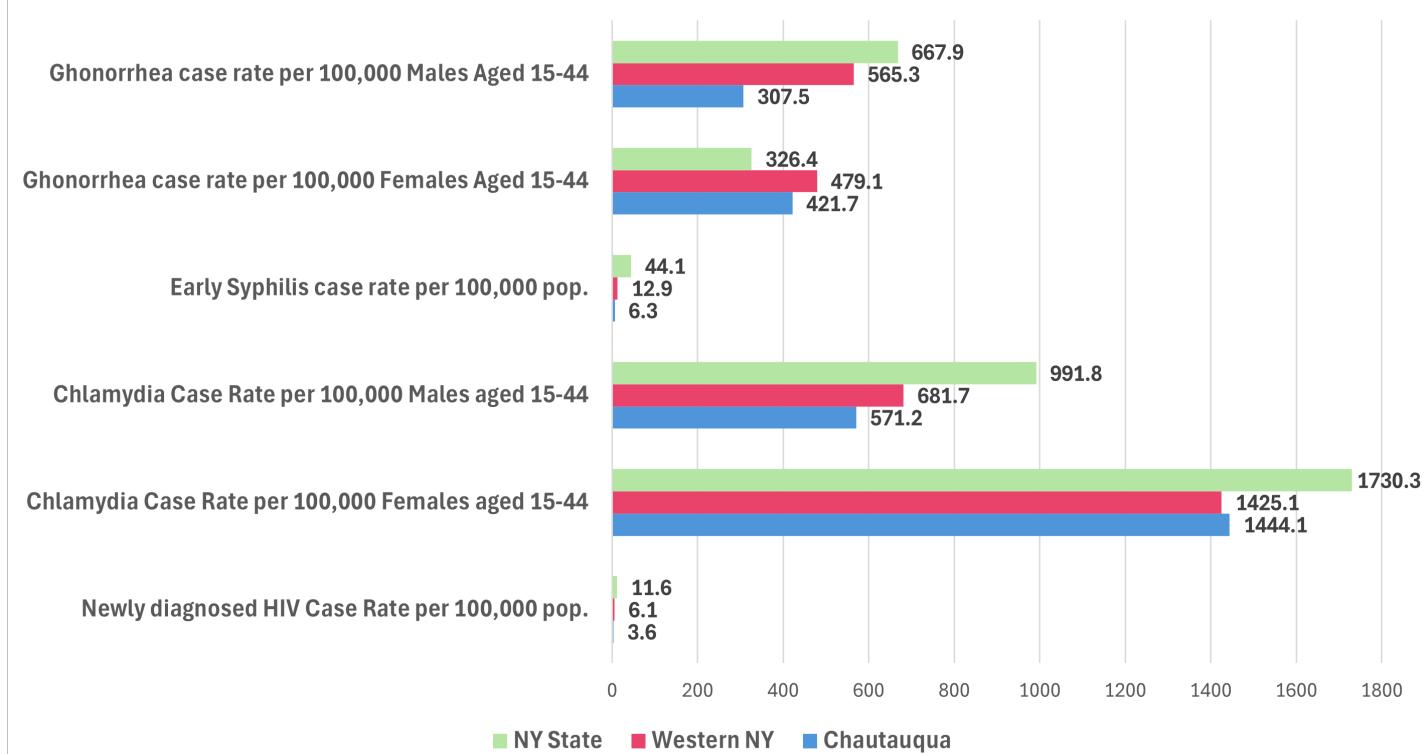
### Sexually Transmitted Infections

Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI), with exception to years 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, are continually on the rise in NYS and Chautauqua County. The most prevalent bacterial STIs are chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis. In 2023 there were a combined total of 163,098 cases of these STIs in NYS. The highest rates of sexually transmitted infections in NYS continued to be seen in young persons, racial/ethnic minority communities, and men who have sex with men.

Reducing or eliminating the risk of exposure is the best way to prevent STIs. Steps to reduce the risk for exposure include abstinence, monogamy, using condoms, and getting tested regularly.

**Chart 3.3** compares rates of STIs in Chautauqua County with those of Western NY and New York State.

#### Chart 3.3 HIV and Sexually Transmitted Infection, 2020-2022



According to the NYS Department of Health 2022 Hepatitis B and C Annual Report, Chautauqua County had the 2nd highest rate of newly reported chronic Hepatitis B among NY counties in 2022, at 36.1 per 100,000 people (46 cases). Chautauqua County also ranked 2nd among NYS counties for newly reported cases of Hepatitis C in 2022 at 65.1 per 100,000 population (83 cases). However, cases of newly diagnosed chronic HCV have decreased in the county from a high of 120.8 per 100,000 population in 2018.

Hepatitis B and Hepatitis C are both viral infections that affect the liver. Both viruses can cause liver inflammation, cirrhosis, and an increased risk of liver cancer. Hepatitis C is more likely to become chronic, so if untreated it often causes progressive liver disease.

The Hepatitis B virus (HBV) is spread through contact with infected blood or other bodily fluids that can occur through sharing syringes or accidental needle sticks, or through sexual activity with an infected person. Hepatitis B can be transmitted to infants born to infected mothers during childbirth. Hospital vaccination rates at birth have steadily increased, strengthening early protection and contributing to a significant decline in perinatal transmission. Chronic HBV is not curable, but the virus can be suppressed with antiviral medications.

Hepatitis C (HCV) is primarily spread through direct blood-to-blood contact, especially through sharing needles or unsafe medical equipment. HCV may also be transmitted through sexual activity or from mother to child at birth, although this is less common. There is no vaccine for HCV, but chronic HCV can be cured in most people with newer

antiviral drugs.

### Maternity and Infant Health

According to the NYS Department of Health, there were 1,157 live births in Chautauqua County in 2022. Information provided by the NYS Department of Health in **Table 3.3** for 2022 indicates that the percentage of pregnant women in Chautauqua County receiving prenatal care in the first trimester is fairly consistent with the statewide average. The percentage of Chautauqua County women receiving early prenatal care increased from 67.0% in 2019 to 73.0% in 2022. However, 7.7% of women received prenatal care late in the pregnancy (3rd trimester) or not at all.

Late prenatal care increases risks for both mother and baby, including low birth weight, preterm birth, stillbirth, and maternal mortality. The delay prevents early detection of complications like high blood pressure, anemia, and infections, and hinders monitoring of the baby's development, potentially leading to fetal growth restrictions. It also means that pregnant women may be missing out on essential preventive care and education regarding behaviors like alcohol use and proper nutrition.

*Table 3.3 Prenatal care and Low Birth weight*

	Chautauqua County	New York State
Births with early (1st trimester) prenatal care	73.0%	73.8%
Births with late (3rd trimester) or no prenatal care	7.7%	6.2%
Low birth weight births (<2.5kg)	8.2%	8.6%
Very low birth weight births (<1.5kg)	1.2%	1.3%
Premature births (<37 weeks gestation)	10.8%	9.4%

NYS Department of Health data also reveal that Chautauqua County has a high rate of newborns affected by narcotics compared to the statewide level. The county rate of newborns with neonatal withdrawal syndrome and/or affected by maternal use of drugs of addiction is 15.9 per 1,000 newborn discharges for 2022, down considerably from a high of 51.2 per 1,000 in 2017. However, the county rate is still much higher than the state's Maternal and Child Health target objective of 9.1 per 1,000. The statewide rate is below the target at 6.0 per 1,000 newborn discharges. The data indicate a critical need for services and education to pregnant women, particularly those who abuse narcotics.

WIC data reported by the NYS Department of Health shows that Chautauqua County has slightly higher rates of women who are underweight (5.2%) or overweight (24.5%) prior to pregnancy compared to NYS (4.5% and 27.9% respectively), and a significantly higher pre-pregnancy obesity rate (36.3% for Chautauqua County and 27.4% for NYS). Nearly half of pregnant women in the county (48.2%) gained more weight than recommended, compared to 40.2% statewide. Gestational diabetes was lower in the county (5.6%) than the state (7.1%), while pregnancy-related hypertension was relatively the same at the county (7.6%) and state (7.7%) levels.

In Chautauqua County, 56.8% of infants are exclusively breastfed in delivery hospitals —higher than both WNY (49.0%) and NYS (47.1%). By the time the baby is 6 months old, just 18.4% of WIC mothers in the county are still breastfeeding. Breast milk provides numerous critical benefits for newborns, supporting both immediate and long-term health and development, including immune protection, optimal brain and nervous system growth, and easier digestion. Breastfeeding also promotes skin-to-skin contact and strengthens the parent-infant bond.



### Adolescent Pregnancy

The NYS Department of Health data for 2020-2022 indicate that rates of adolescent pregnancies and births in Chautauqua County exceed the NY State average. The average teen birthrate for NY State is 9.1 per 1,000 females ages 15-19, compared to 17.7 per 1,000 for Chautauqua County. The average teen pregnancy rate for NY State is 18.4 per 1,000 females in that age group, and for the county is 21.7 per 1,000.

Current teen birth and pregnancy rates for the county represent a substantial decrease over the last decade. The NYS Department of Health reported a birth rate of 32.0 per 1,000 females ages 15-19 and a pregnancy rate of 42.8 per 1,000 females in that age group for 2010-2012.

**Table 3.4** lists the zip codes within Chautauqua County that have the highest rates of teen pregnancy according to data from the NYS Department of Health.

*Table 3.4 Teen Pregnancy Rate by City/Town per 1,000 Females Ages 15-19*

Zip Code	City/Town	Total Births To Teens 2020-2022	Teen Birth Rate	Teen Pregnancy Rate
14048	Dunkirk	448	36.6	43.5
14701	Jamestown	1,245	32.8	39.7
14733	Falconer	110	30.7	30.7
14723	Cherry Creek	59	30.3	30.3
14738	Frewsburg	96	25.9	25.9
14781	Irving	77	24.2	24.2
14718	Cassadaga	49	21.5	26.9
14775	Ripley	65	20.8	20.8
14747	Kennedy	65	20.5	20.5
14062	Forestville	82	19.8	23.8
14716	Ashville	66	19.6	29.4
14787	Westfield	116	16.7	22.2
14740	Gerry	37	10.1	10.1

### Seniors

According to data provided by the Census Bureau 2023 ACS, seniors (65 years of age and older) make up 21.0% of Chautauqua County's population, compared to 17.4% of the population statewide. The poverty rate of the over-65 population in the county is 10.1%. Many seniors live on fixed incomes and have challenges that include food insecurity, financial instability, and a lack of transportation to access health care. In Chautauqua County, 33.1% of seniors have some type of disability, compared to 17.8% of seniors statewide. Services such as home care, housekeeping, personal care, and home-delivered meals are available, but the need far exceeds the demand.

In-home care is a critically needed service, as it helps seniors stay in their own homes and avoid costly nursing home care. In 2026, NY State increased the minimum wage for Home Care workers to \$18.65/hour for regions outside of the NY City metro area and surrounding counties. While this is good news for workers, reimbursement rates for providers have not kept pace with the increase, causing instability among the agencies providing the services.

### Access to Health Care

Despite positive trends with respect to clinical care, Chautauqua County has relatively few primary care, dental, and mental health providers as compared with the rest of New York state and the United States overall. With respect to

mental health providers, the county has less than half the percentage of providers than top performing areas of the United States. Chautauqua County has been designated as a Health Professional Shortage Area by the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration. The designation applies to primary health care, as well as mental health care and dentistry.

Until 2019, Chautauqua County had four hospitals: Brooks-TLC Hospital in Dunkirk, Lakeshore Hospital in Irving, UPMC Chautauqua, and Westfield Memorial Hospital in Westfield. However, in December 2019 Lake Shore Hospital announced its closing following several years of financial difficulties. A news release published in the Dunkirk Observer in May 2025 ("Deal Allows for Transformation of Local Hospital") announced that the New York Medical Center acquired the property with plans to provide comprehensive behavioral health and substance abuse services. When renovation is complete, the facility will have a 180-bed capacity.

Information provided by the NYS Department of Health indicates that there are a total of 356 hospital beds available in Chautauqua County, including 287 at UPMC Chautauqua in Jamestown, 65 at Brooks-TLC in Dunkirk, and 4 beds at Westfield Memorial Hospital. UPMC Chautauqua is the only hospital in Chautauqua County that currently offers labor and delivery services. Chautauqua County also has 776 beds in Nursing and Rehab facilities.

In 2025, the Brooks-TLC Hospital System broke ground for a new 133,000-square-foot, 29-bed acute care hospital in the Village of Fredonia to replace the aging 170,000 square foot hospital in Dunkirk. The project is expected to take about 2 ½ years to complete.

Chautauqua County is also home to the Chautauqua Center, a Federally Qualified Health Center providing access to primary care, dental, and behavioral health services. They have centers located in Jamestown, Dunkirk, and Forestville that offer access to care for county residents who are economically disadvantaged.

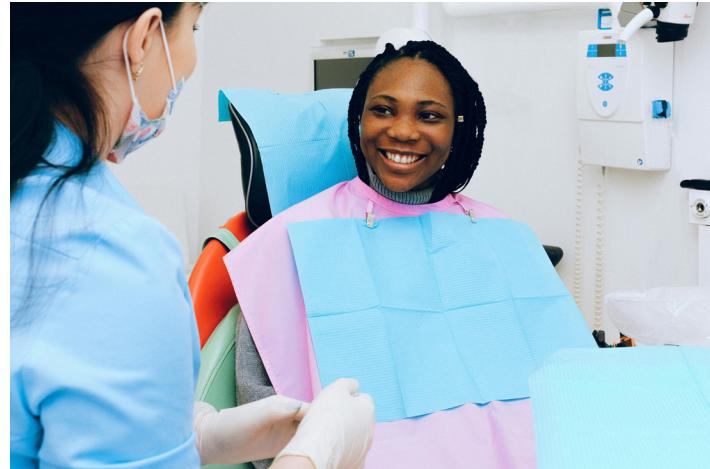
WellNow Urgent Care centers operate in Jamestown, Lakewood, and Dunkirk and offer quick access to treatment for non-life-threatening injuries and illnesses. Urgent care centers offer several benefits, including walk-in access for common illnesses and injuries and significantly shorter wait times compared to emergency rooms and physician appointments.

### Health Insurance

The Census Bureau's 2023 American Community Survey reports that 5.4% of Chautauqua County's population is uninsured, a significant decrease since 2013 when 9.0% of the population had no insurance. The types of health insurance held by the county's population from 2013 to 2023 are illustrated in **Table 3.5**.

*Table 3.5 Types of Health Insurance in County Population, 2013-2023*

	2013	2015	2017	2019	2021	2023
Uninsured	9.0%	7.7%	6.6%	5.4%	5.2%	5.4%
Military or VA	1.4%	1.5%	1.8%	1.5%	1.4%	1.3%
Non-Group Plan	11.7%	11.0%	11.8%	13.2%	14.0%	14.3%
Medicare	12.1%	13.3%	13.9%	14.7%	15.3%	15.9%
Medicaid	18.3%	19.6%	21.1%	22.6%	23.5%	25.0%
Employer	47.5%	47.0%	44.8%	42.5%	40.5%	38.1%



## Mental/Behavioral Health

According to the Disparity Impact Statement report for 2022-2026 released by the Chautauqua County Department of Mental Hygiene, there are an estimated 19,000 county residents (18.9% of adults) who have a serious mental illness (SMI), substance use disorder (SUD), or both. Chautauqua County markedly surpasses regional and state rates for adult behavioral health hospitalizations (88.4 per 10,000 population vs. 52.7 and 60.6, respectively) and youth behavioral health hospitalizations (70 vs. 24.3 and 25.5 respectively) (Chautauqua County Department of Health and Human Services, 2023). Youth and adults are increasingly turning to emergency departments for behavioral health needs, even though EDs are not well-suited for this type of care.

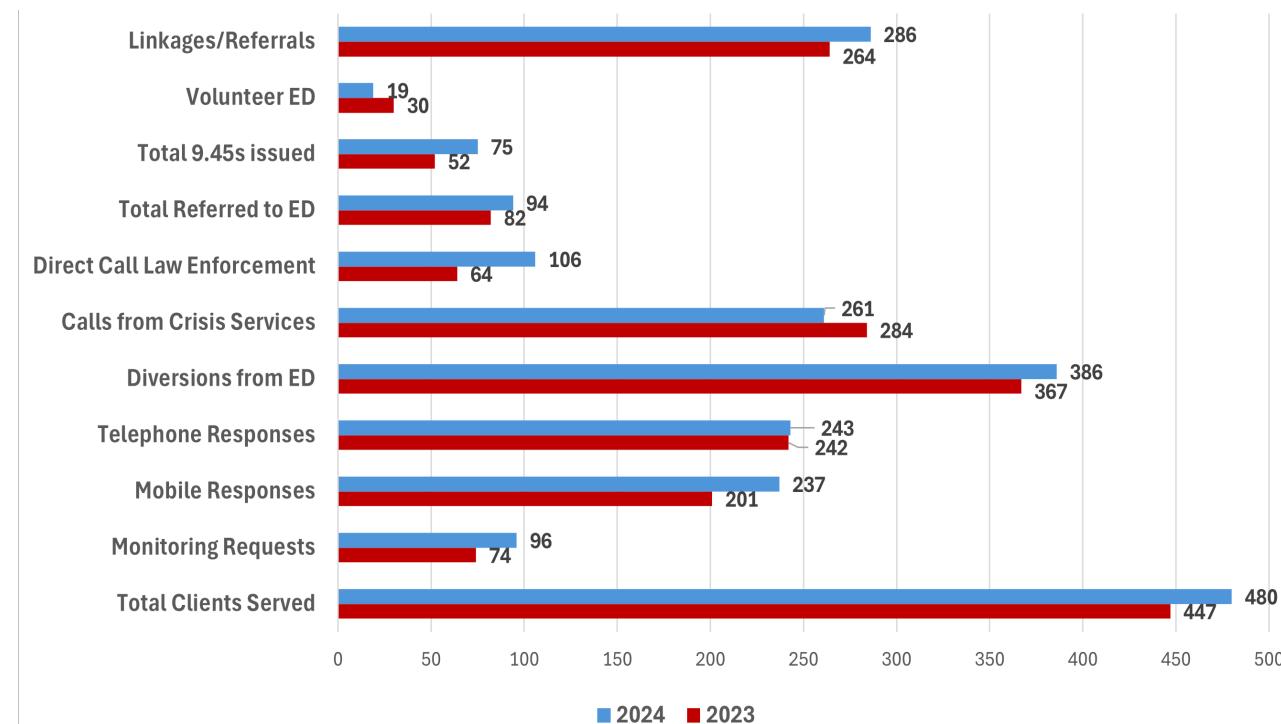
Chautauqua County faces systemic resource challenges that limit its capacity to meet the growing demand for mental/behavioral health services, including a severe shortage of providers, widespread poverty, transportation barriers, and inadequate funding. Like many rural areas, the county's challenges are interconnected and reinforce each other, creating a complex web of problems.

A 24/7 Crisis Line is available in the county to assist anyone having or suspected of having a mental health or emotional crisis, which is managed by Crisis Services in Buffalo. Situations that are not able to be de-escalated are referred to local providers that include the Mobile Crisis Day Team (operated by Chautauqua County), COI's Mobile Crisis Outreach Program (MCOP), and local law enforcement. Services of the Mobile Crisis Teams include crisis intervention, assessment, safety planning, referrals, linkage to appropriate mental health services, and follow-up.

The Chautauqua County Department of Mental Hygiene Day Mobile Crisis Team (MCT) operates during regular weekday business hours (Monday–Friday, 8 a.m.–4:30 p.m.). Based on local data on mental health and law enforcement collaboration, Chautauqua County Day MCT responded to 424 mental health crisis calls in 2023. The team successfully managed 403 of those calls (approximately 95%) without involving police or requiring hospitalization. The team's success was recognized with the National Association of Counties (NACo) Achievement Award in 2024 for its exceptional service in addressing mental health and substance use crises. This prestigious award highlighted the unit's success in reducing hospitalizations and law enforcement involvement by providing on-site support, de-escalation, and linkages to mental health services.

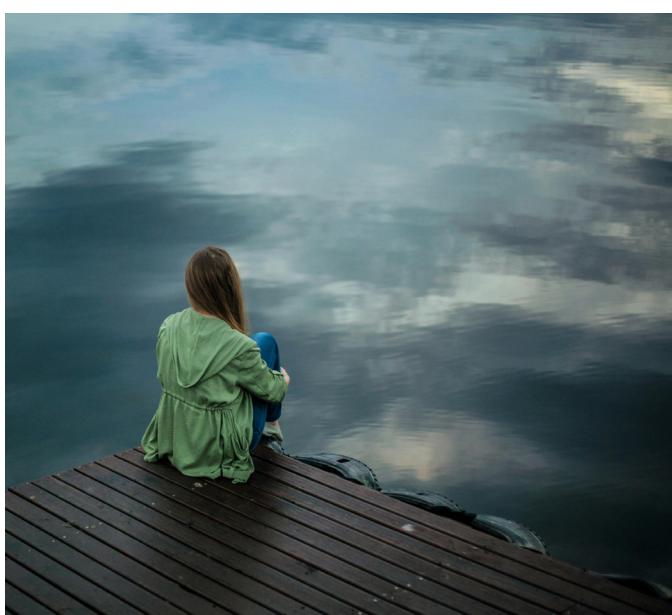
Chautauqua Opportunities Inc.'s Mobile Crisis Outreach Program (MCOP) handles mental health crisis calls during non-business hours, including weekday evenings, nights, and 24 hours on weekends and holidays. COI's MCOP report for 2023 and 2024 indicate that there is growth and success with collaboration between Crisis Teams and Law Enforcement Entities. It also indicates a continued increase in behavioral health and substance use crisis call and service's needs. Information from COI's MCOP County Reports for 2023 and 2024 is provided in **Chart 3.4**.

*Chart 3.4 COI Mobile Crisis Outreach Program Data, 2023-2024*



Several multi-system level factors are attributed to impacting the mental health care imbalances in the county:

- Macro Systems Level – Systemic and Logistical Barriers: Systemic and logistical barriers include critical shortages of professional providers and healthcare system gaps including inpatient, outpatient, and crisis service limitations. Chautauqua County is a federally designated Mental Health Professional Shortage Area, with a 550:1 provider-to-population ratio compared to 310:1 for NY State. Workforce shortages stem from low salaries, poor reimbursement rates, and geographic/cultural barriers, which drive providers to urban areas or out of the field. Heavy caseloads, low pay, and administrative burdens also contribute to burnout and turnover, making recruitment and retention difficult. Low insurance and Medicaid reimbursement further strain agencies' ability to operate. System gaps persist, including a loss of inpatient beds after the 2020 closure of Lakeshore Hospital, over-reliance on EDs for behavioral health crises, and stalled funding for Crisis Stabilization Centers. This leaves the Chautauqua County Mental Hygiene Day Mobile Crisis Team, the Chautauqua Opportunities Inc. Mobile Crisis Outreach Program, and law enforcement to manage the influx of increased need throughout the county. (Chautauqua County Community Health Assessment 2022-2024).
- Mezzo System Level – Poverty, Access, and Complex Care: The mezzo level barriers include a high poverty rate, rural living, and complex client care needs. Chautauqua County's high rates of poverty and homelessness limit residents' ability to afford or access care, with many uninsured or facing prohibitive out-of-pocket costs. While Medicaid is an option, many residents remain uninsured, under insured, or believe they cannot afford coverage. Homelessness is strongly linked to mental illness and substance use. A 2024 report from the NY State Comptroller's Office indicates that 10% of the homeless population statewide struggles with severe mental illness or substance use. A Point in Time (PIT) count of the homeless population in the county conducted in August 2024 by the Chautauqua County Homeless Coalition reveals a much higher prevalence of mental illness and substance use among the local homeless population. During interviews of unsheltered homeless persons conducted during the PIT count, 80% of those surveyed reported having mental health conditions and 70% reported substance use. In addition to revealing much higher rates of mental illness and substance use locally in comparison to statewide data, these results underscore that these conditions are often co-occurring.
- Micro Systems Level - Stigma, Social and Confidentiality, Knowledge and Awareness: Behavioral health barriers in Chautauqua County relate to individual and family challenges, such as stigma, financial constraints, and practical issues like transportation. Mental illness and addiction carry significant stigma, especially in close-knit rural communities such as Chautauqua County. Many people fear being judged, which discourages them from seeking help. Rural residents often worry about a lack of confidentiality when seeking treatment, which can be a valid concern as reported in many rural and smaller communities. Lack of awareness with limited knowledge of services was identified as a barrier in the "Chautauqua County Community Health Assessment 2022-2024" from the Chautauqua County Department of Health and Human Services. Many people in Chautauqua County don't know what services are available or how to get help. Stigma, confusion about resources, and limited knowledge about handling a mental health crisis illustrate the need for increased education and training in the community.



The combined effect of these challenges is a system under immense strain. High-need individuals often end up in emergency departments or engaged with law enforcement due to a lack of proper community-based systems. This places an enormous burden on a limited pool of resources and can lead to poor outcomes for residents. Compounding these struggles are personal, social, cultural, systemic issues, including high

poverty rates, provider shortages, and a shrinking capacity for services, all of which disproportionately affect vulnerable populations in Chautauqua County.

### Suicides and Self-harm Injuries

Suicides and self-harm injuries are a growing public health concern. Each year, too many New York State residents die due to suicide. Suicide is a complex problem that requires a comprehensive approach to prevention. Information from the NYS Department of Health for 2020-2022 confirms that there is a significant need for mental health resources in Chautauqua County.

- The age-adjusted rate of hospitalization for self-inflicted injuries is 8.5 per 10,000 persons in the county, higher than the rate for the state as a whole (5.6 per 10,000).
- For individuals aged 15-19, the rate of hospitalizations for self-inflicted injuries is 24.4 per 10,000 in the county, compared to 13.7 per 10,000 statewide.
- In Chautauqua County, the age-adjusted rate of mortality by suicide is 12.9 per 100,000 individuals, compared to 9.7 per 100,000 for the state.

Suicide rates are often higher in more rural areas, which face particular challenges such as less access to mental health services, transportation barriers, and stigma around seeking help.

### Drugs and Alcohol

Chautauqua County has been federally designated as a High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area. The NY State Department of Health's 2024 Opioid Annual Report indicates that overdose deaths involving opioids and non-fatal opioid-related hospital events in the county totaled 492 in 2022, a rate of 390.4 per 100,000 population, the 2nd highest rate among New York's 62 counties. By comparison, neighboring Erie County (including the large City of Buffalo) had a rate of 202.4 per 100,000 population the same year.

Information from the Chautauqua County Department of Health and Human Services Annual Reports 2022-2024 shows that, after steadily increasing from 2010 to 2020 due to the growing presence of fentanyl in the drug supply, county officials reported a recent positive reversal in overdose death rates. Many overdoses involved drugs laced with fentanyl without the user's knowledge. Fatal overdoses dropped by over 50% between 2023 (63 deaths) and 2024 (28 deaths). County officials confirm this decline represents a major turnaround, driven by a united community effort. The 2024 figure is the lowest since 2018. The widespread distribution of naloxone (Narcan) kits is considered a key factor in reducing overall overdose fatalities. County officials hope that outreach programs in schools are also contributing to the decline in overdoses among younger individuals.

The county Substance Use and Addiction Services Coordinator reported in February 2025 that toxicology reports showed a reduced presence of fentanyl and cocaine in overdose deaths during 2024. While other substances have declined, the presence of methamphetamine in overdose deaths increased in 2024, becoming slightly more common than fentanyl.

An analysis of data from the New York State Office of Addiction Services and Supports (OASAS) demonstrates that Chautauqua County's rate of opioid-related emergency department visits was the highest rate among all counties in the state at 161.1 per 100,000 population (203 emergency room visits) in 2024. OASAS reports enrollment of 898 Chautauqua County individuals in treatment programs in 2024 who reported opioids as a primary substance.

Jamestown and Dunkirk represent the largest urban



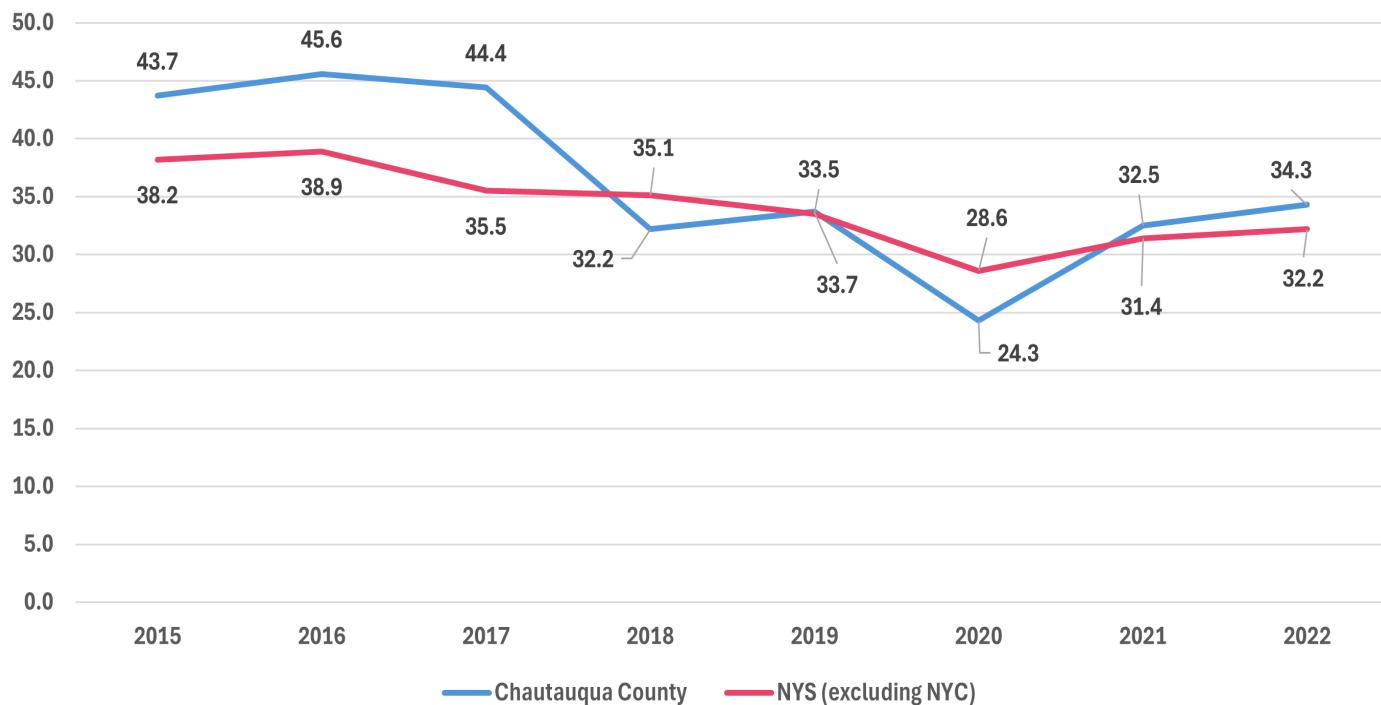
populations in the southern and northern ends of the county, respectively. The data shows that while Jamestown has consistently faced a high burden of overdoses, the north county, including Dunkirk, has seen more fluctuation, with a notable spike in 2023 and an encouraging reversal in 2024. No known overdose deaths occurred in the city or town of Dunkirk during the first seven months of 2024. This suggests a shift in drug activity or the effectiveness of local interventions, like increased naloxone distribution. In contrast, the first seven months of 2023 saw 10 people in the Dunkirk area die from overdoses. Overall, 19.2% of overdose deaths countywide occurred in Dunkirk in 2023.

Chautauqua County has a documented history of higher opioid use indicators than the rest of the state. Research shows a direct link between increased opioid prescriptions and fatal car crashes, especially among males and younger adults. Statewide data from 2019–2021 showed a substantial increase in narcotic analgesics among drivers evaluated by Drug Recognition Experts (DREs). The effectiveness of enforcement is impacted by the limited number of trained DRE officers across the state. The complexities of scientifically measuring cannabis impairment are also a challenge, particularly since marijuana was legalized for recreational use in 2021. Recent state-funded programs have sought to increase DRE training and provide specialized instruction on recognizing cannabis-impaired motorists.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Chautauqua County has experienced an increase in adult binge drinking with the rate reaching 19.9% in 2022, above the New York State average of 18.8% and a rise from the county rate of 17.7% in 2021. This trend suggests a growing challenge with excessive alcohol consumption in the county.

The rate of alcohol-related motor vehicle injuries and deaths in Chautauqua County rose to 34.3 per 100,000 population in 2022 after a low of 24.3 per 100,000 in 2020. The rate in the county has been as high as 45.8 (2016), as illustrated in **Chart 3.5**.

*Chart 3.5 Alcohol Related Motor Vehicle Injuries and Deaths per 100,000 population*



A 2013-2014 NYS Youth Development Survey found that 49.9% of Chautauqua County 12th graders and 33.9% of 10th graders reported using alcohol within the 30 days prior to the survey. Other findings for Chautauqua County youth, as reported by Prevention Works, include:

- 27.3% of 12th graders indicated they exhibited binge drinking behavior, which means to drink five or more drinks in one sitting during the past two weeks.
- The average age for the onset of regular use of alcohol was 14.8 years.

- The average age for the first use of marijuana was 13.8 years.
- 32.1% of the students believe that it is relatively easy to obtain alcohol, marijuana and other drugs.

### Community-based initiatives

The Chautauqua County Department of Health and several local law enforcement agencies have been participating in the Nationwide ODMAP project (<http://www.odmap.org/>), which provides local officials with real-time data regarding the nature and location of both fatal and non-fatal overdoses within a specific region. In Chautauqua County, the Department of Health has partnered with the Mental Health Association to offer support to individuals who experienced a non-fatal overdose. The reporting police department will notify the Department of Health of non-fatal overdoses in their jurisdiction that will in turn notify the Mental Health Association. A Peer Advocate is assigned to make contact with the individual to offer resources and assistance in linking with treatment options.

Chautauqua County has implemented collaborative programs among community providers. Efforts focus on increasing access to naloxone training and distribution. Organizations such as Prevention Works are expanding prevention efforts among school-age youth. Priorities in the Chautauqua County 2024 - 2025 strategic plan to combat the problem of substance use are to:

- Prevent overdoses and reduce harms.
- Prioritize prevention.
- Increase Substance Use Disorder treatment engagement, retention and effectiveness.
- Support families.
- Strengthen the workforce.
- Expand a public health approach to behavioral health through improved data collection and analysis.
- Address housing and other social determinants in supporting recovery.



In Chautauqua County, the rate of behavioral health issues and substance use disorders (SUD) continues to be significantly higher than the rest of New York State, straining resources and increasing interactions with law enforcement. In response, County and local agencies have developed several collaborative programs to address the intersection of behavioral health and the criminal justice system.

Chautauqua County's Mobile Crisis Teams are the county's primary resource for diverting mental health and substance abuse crises away from law enforcement involvement and emergency rooms. These teams are staffed with Licensed Social workers, Mental Health Clinicians, and peer specialists who respond to crises in the community with diversions services, can respond to or support law enforcement on calls, including after hours, to provide de-escalation, assessment, and connection to services. The teams have several key initiatives to address behavioral health and substance use emergencies:

- Prevent hospitalizations and ER visits: The central goal of the MCT and MCOP Teams is to manage and resolve mental health crises on-site. By providing interventions in the home or community, the teams aim to prevent individuals from needing emergency department care or inpatient hospitalization.

- Provide immediate and compassionate support: They offer confidential, face-to-face or telephonic crisis intervention, with the goal of providing assistance to any Chautauqua County resident experiencing or at risk of a behavioral health or substance use crisis, including adults, adolescents, and families. When a person is in crisis poses a danger to themselves or others, law enforcement entities may still be required to transport them to an emergency room for evaluation, based on state mental hygiene law.
- Create linkage to ongoing services: A core function of the MCT and MCOP Teams is to connect clients with appropriate, ongoing mental health care and community resources. This includes referrals to local peer services, counseling, and other support networks.
- Minimize law enforcement involvement: The county government actively promotes the usage of MCT and MCOP Teams as a way to reduce reliance solely on law enforcement entities for behavioral health calls.

In 2021, the Chautauqua County Department of Mental Hygiene and the Chautauqua County Sheriff's Department came together to address a shared challenge: behavioral health agencies and law enforcement were often encountering the same individuals, sometimes duplicating efforts and sometimes leaving gaps in services. Leaders were not consistently in collaboration, and work often happened independently. From that discussion, the Behavioral Health Law Enforcement Collaborative initiative was born. All behavioral health agencies, hospitals, social service programs, law enforcement entities, emergency and first responders were invited to come to the table with a clear goal: build relationships and trust between behavioral health and law enforcement leadership, move beyond silos, and create stronger, more coordinated responses for our community members. Over the past few years, the group has achieved exactly that: system issues were identified, addressed, and resolved, improving the collaboration across agencies.



Law enforcement now has direct, trusted contacts within behavioral health agencies for timely assistance. The full circle approach began with the launch of Chautauqua County Department of Mental Hygiene Daytime Mobile Crisis Team (MCT) in 2021. This program and its unified collaboration with Chautauqua Opportunities Inc's. Mobile Crisis Outreach Program together bridged a gap resulting in countywide 24/7 access to mobile crisis coverage.

The Chautauqua Comprehensive Addiction Response and Evaluation System (CARES) program is a multi-sector network that includes law enforcement, behavioral health, and other community agencies. Its purpose is to increase access to timely and effective help for individuals and families dealing with substance use disorders (SUD). The program emphasizes collaboration and community networking to provide support and resources. In June 2024, the Chautauqua County Sheriff's Office hosted a "CARES Connections" event to bring together various agencies and organizations, such as Chautauqua Opportunities Inc., Chautauqua County Mental Hygiene and Health and Humans Services, The Resource Center, UPMC Chautauqua, and Prevention Works.

In May 2025, Chautauqua County introduced a new "Situation Table" program, a multi-agency collaboration that addresses individuals in high-risk situations before they escalate. The table brings together representatives from law enforcement, mental health, and social service agencies to discuss individuals facing various risks, including dangerous living situations, mental health issues, and substance abuse. Referrals to the program can be made by law enforcement and other agencies.

## TRENDS

Death rates for every one of the seven leading causes of death are higher in Chautauqua County than the statewide rates. The county has high rates of risk factors such as obesity, overweight, and smoking that lead to poor health



outcomes.

The percentage of pregnant women receiving early prenatal care is consistent with the state average. However, Chautauqua County has a high rate of newborns affected by narcotics compared to the statewide level. Teen birth and pregnancy rates for the county have decreased substantially over the last decade, but are still much higher than the state average.

There is a continuing increase in crisis calls for behavioral health and substance use issues that put a strain on local resources. Recent collaborative efforts among providers have reduced the number of unnecessary emergency room visits.

Fatal overdoses dropped by over 50% between 2023 (63 deaths) and 2024 (28 deaths) in the county, which largely attributed to the widespread use of Narcan.

Drug-impaired driving is a growing concern in New York, and some reports suggest that Chautauqua County, with its history of higher-than-average substance abuse indicators, likely faces

similar trends. Legalization of cannabis and continued challenges with opioids and stimulants are key factors affecting these trends statewide. The combination of an opioid crisis history, cannabis legalization, and a rural context that may involve a higher prevalence of substance-related traffic issues, suggests that drug-impaired driving continues to be a serious concern for Chautauqua County.

State reports indicate that cannabis is one of the most frequently detected drugs in impaired drivers. Legalization of adult-use cannabis in 2021 has made it harder to enforce impaired driving laws, as arrests initially dipped while concerns persisted about more people driving under the influence. The difficulty lies in the lack of a standardized test like a breathalyzer, which complicates enforcement efforts.

State data indicates substantial increases in central nervous system stimulants among impaired drivers. Additionally, a significant number of impaired driving incidents involve a combination of drugs, such as alcohol and cannabis, which substantially raises the risk of a crash.

## COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS

Data collected from COI's 2025 Community Needs Survey (Appendix I) indicate that cost-related issues for health care cause the highest concern among those who responded. Affordability of health insurance is a high concern for 41.3% of community members responding to the survey, with the ability to afford medical or dental care of great concern to 37.1% of responders. Moderate concerns include access to physical and mental health care. Over a quarter of responders worry about the mental health or physical health of a household member. About 18% of responders reported being unable to access needed physical care, mental health care, or prescriptions for themselves or a household member within the last year.

Most survey responders reported seeing a primary care doctor at least annually (92.2%), although fewer of them make an annual dental visit (63.3%). Over 18% are not able to access medical specialists when needed.

Major issues brought up by participants of COI's August 2025 Community Conversations (Appendix III) include access to care, especially mental health care and access in the most rural areas of the county, as well as the cost of health and dental care. They also discussed the limited options for OB/GYN care, and transportation issues that present obstacles for access to all types of care.

## STRENGTHS AND OPPORTUNITIES

- The availability of Narcan has decreased the number of deaths due to Opioids.
- A community wide collaborative initiative started in January 2022 continues between law enforcement and behavioral health providers to better coordinate systems of care.

- Deaths from cancer have decreased in the county over the last several years.
- The Situation Table, which started in early 2025, has brought more service providers together to discuss ways to help the community deal with many health concerns.
- Chautauqua County residents have access to training on the administration of Narcan, which is used to reverse the effects of an opiate overdose, through the Chautauqua County Department of Health, the Mental Health Association, and Evergreen Health. Training can also be done online through the Chautauqua County Mental Health Association. Training is provided to various community organizations and groups, emergency medical personnel and other first responders, and inmates at the Chautauqua County jail.

## CHALLENGES

- Low incomes in the county prevent many residents from being able to access health care.
- The limited public transportation system in the county and the county's designation as a Health Professional Shortage Area make it difficult for some residents to access care.
- Declining populations with high percentages of elderly (over age 65) and disabled Chautauqua County residents create a strong need for agencies that provide services to assist these populations.
- Tobacco use, obesity and other social determinant of health significantly contribute to preventable diseases.
- High rates of morbidity and mortality result from preventable chronic diseases.
- The cost of health, mental health, and dental care can still be unaffordable for those with insurance due to copays and high deductibles.
- There are limited medical and dental providers who participate in government funded health and dental plans.



- There is a lack of mental health treatment providers and facilities in the county.
- There is a lack of substance abuse treatment providers and facilities in the county.
- Cuts to programs such as the Affordable Care Act and SNAP will create significant challenges that impact the health and wellbeing of many individuals and families.

## NEEDS / RECOMMENDATIONS

- Communities need increased opportunities for nutrition education and physical activity to alleviate obesity and overweight.
- Individuals need access to physical, dental, and mental health care providers.
- Communities need increased mental health services.
- Communities need expanded public transportation options for individuals to access medical care.
- Communities need increased funding and opportunities for education and awareness to prevent sexually transmitted infections and unintentional pregnancies.
- Agencies need funding to increase substance abuse education and services, including for adolescents and pregnant women.
- Families need in-home personal care support for seniors to enable them to stay in their homes and avoid transitioning to institutional care.
- Agencies need increased funding to provide Narcan and associated training to reduce overdose deaths.
- Agencies should continue local collaborative efforts to address and respond to crisis calls.



# 4. Child Care

## INTRODUCTION

Early education and childcare aren't just services, they're the building blocks for healthy growth, learning, and strong families. The quality of childcare directly impacts a child's ability to learn and build healthy relationships. Unlimited learning opportunities in a safe, nurturing environment are essential to every child's growth and development.

In New York, federal and state early learning opportunities serve more than 317,416 children and their families, or about 24% of children ages five and under, according to 2025 data from the First Five Years Fund. In addition, regulated home-based and center-based childcare supports hundreds of thousands of children each year, ensuring they have safe environments, caring adults, and the chance to learn, explore, and thrive. Regulated childcare should be affordable, accessible, and of high quality.

Oversight and monitoring of both regulated home-based and center-based childcare in NY State is the responsibility of the NYS Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS). There are approximately 17,264 licensed and registered childcare providers in the state, with a total capacity for about 788,744 children. According to Child Care Facts & Figures 2024 from OCFS, roughly 120,000 children in about 70,000 families receive childcare each month with assistance subsidies from state programs.

### Modalities of Child Care

- Day Care Centers – OCFS licensed care in a non-residential building for six or more children. (No small centers currently operate in Chautauqua County.)
- Group Family Day Care – OCFS licensed care in a provider's home for up to 12 young children (ages 0–5) and up to 4 school-age children when school is out. Each adult can care for no more than two infants at a time.
- Family Day Care – OCFS registered care in a provider's home for up to 6 young children and 2 school-age children when school is out. Each adult can care for only two infants at a time.
- School-Age Child Care – OCFS registered care for children in kindergarten through age 12 provided outside of school hours, during breaks, and on holidays.
- Legally Exempt Informal Care – OCFS regulated paid care by a friend or family member chosen by the parent. The provider enrolls as "legally exempt" if the family receives childcare assistance. Limits apply based on relationship and setting.
- Legally Exempt Group Care – Care in a non-residential setting that does not require a license but still operates under OCFS rules.

## DEMOGRAPHICS AND STATISTICS

Between 2023 and 2024, there was a modest increase in childcare capacity in New York State of about 100 childcare providers and approximately 8,500 slots, according to OCFS. However, while the overall number of slots has increased, many areas outside of major metro regions continue to struggle with shortages, especially for infants and toddlers.

The number of enrolled Legally Exempt providers in New York grew by roughly 63%, from approximately 7,100 in 2022 to about 11,600 in 2025. This jump is largely attributed to the October 2023 expansion of income eligibility for the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) and persistent 'childcare desert' conditions across WNY, including parts of Chautauqua

County. A childcare desert is where demand for care far exceeds available licensed slots. Areas where there are three or more children under the age of five per available childcare slot in local day care centers, family day care, or group family day care programs are considered childcare deserts.

The numbers of childcare programs and slots in Chautauqua County are illustrated in **Table 4.1** for each year 2022-2025.

*Chart 4.1 Child Care Availability in Chautauqua County*

	Center Based Programs		Family Child Care		Group Family Child Care		School Aged Programs	
	Programs	Slots	Programs	Slots	Programs	Slots	Programs	Slots
2025	19	1,590	33	263	13	208	13	930
2024	18	1,531	29	222	13	208	13	899
2023	20	1,632	29	230	12	192	13	1,281
2022	23	1,602	27	214	15	240	13	1,738

Chautauqua County's enrolled Legally Exempt providers nearly doubled—from 206 in 2022 to 406 in 2025. This 97% increase lines up with expanded CCAP eligibility and steady demand in areas with too few licensed slots.

Some of the key factors influencing increases or decreases in childcare slots include:

- Workforce shortages, as providers struggle to hire and retain qualified staff—particularly in rural or less populated counties—limiting capacity even when physical space is available.
- Rising costs, including staff wages, facility expenses, regulatory compliance, and insurance, further squeeze margins and often force providers to cap enrollment or close altogether.
- The expiration of temporary funding and pandemic-era subsidies has reduced critical support, leaving some programs unable to sustain operations.
- Strict regulatory ratios, especially for infant and toddler care, make expansion difficult without sufficient staff.
- Geographic disparities contribute to persistent childcare deserts, where limited provider availability means that even statewide gains in supply do not translate to meaningful increases at the county level.

According to The Children's Agenda, there are 4.6 children under the age of 5 per childcare slot in Chautauqua County, and 10.4 children aged 6-12 per childcare slot for that age group.

#### Affordability and Cost of Care

The price of childcare has only gone up in the past few years. Between 2022 and 2025, families in New York have seen steady increases, especially for infant and toddler care. For many, the cost of childcare now looks a lot like another rent payment or mortgage. Even with state help, many parents still struggle to fit the cost of care into their budgets.

Providers are facing increased costs for food, supplies, insurance, and utilities. On top of that, programs have had to raise wages just to keep staff, since work in childcare has long been an underpaid field. Adequate wages are important and necessary, but they also make care more expensive for families.

When care is overly expensive, families tend to make trade-offs. Some parents cut back on their work hours. Others step out of the workforce altogether because their pay barely covers the cost of care. In places like Chautauqua County, where there are fewer providers to choose from, families don't just pay more—they also have fewer options.



Childcare isn't a luxury. It allows parents to work and gives children a safe, steady place to grow. But for too many families, it feels out of reach. Parents currently spend roughly 15% of family income on childcare, compared to about 7% of income in 2022. Current market rates for childcare, as reported by the NYS OCFS, are shown in **Table 4.2** by type of care and age of the child.

*Table 4.2 2024 Weekly Market Child Care Rates*

Care Type	Infant/Toddler (Under 2)	Preschool (3-5 yrs)	School
Day Care Center	\$300-320	\$277	\$257
Family/Group Family Day Care (in-home)	\$265-279	\$263	\$236
Legally Exempt Group Care	--	\$208	\$193
Informal Care (Standard)	\$172-181	\$171	\$153
Informal Care (Enhanced)	\$186-195	\$184	\$165

In October 2023, NYS increased the eligibility for the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) so that families making up to 85% of the State Median Income (SMI) are eligible. Prior to that change, many counties were using income limits expressed in percent of the federal poverty level according to family size, which made eligibility limits more restrictive in many cases. **Table 4.3** illustrates the annual change in CCAP eligibility guidelines from 2022 through 2025. Families earning less than the amount listed would be eligible for CCAP.

*Table 4.3 Income Eligibility for CCAP in New York State 2022-2025*

Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) Income Guidelines		
Year	Family of 2	Family of 4
2025	\$77,226	\$113,567
2024	\$73,869	\$108,632
2023	\$67,490	\$99,250
2022	\$54,930	\$83,250

The increase in income eligibility ceilings means that more middle-income families qualify for childcare assistance. Families who were previously over the limit based on federal poverty level thresholds may now be under the new SMI-based threshold. This expansion also increases the demand, putting more pressure on state and county resources in terms of funding and processing assistance payments.

According to OCFS data, Chautauqua County used only 56% of its Child Care Assistance allocation in 2023—up from 40% in 2022 but still leaving a significant carryover. Utilization improved to 76% in 2024, largely due to the more generous income eligibility guidelines. **Table 4.4** illustrates the percentages of allocations spent to date in 2025 in comparison to other nearby counties (NYS OCFS data).

*Table 4.4 Percent of CCAP Allocation Spent in 2025*

County	% of CCAP Allocation Spent as of 8/25/2025
Cattaraugus	66%
Chautauqua	60%
Erie	68%
Niagara	70%

According to The Children's Agenda publication, *Child Care for All Families: Reforming How New York Manages the Child Care Assistance Program*, counties receive the majority of funds for the CCAP through the Child Care Block Grant

(CCBG) process. Childcare allocations to Chautauqua County increased from \$3,831,084 for 2021-2022 to \$8,316,808 for 2024-2025, an increase of 117%. The CCBG is a combination of federal and state funds, but the recent higher level of spending is primarily due to an unprecedented increase in state funds. The Children's Agenda attributes the higher funding levels in recent years to CCAP enrollment numbers that declined significantly during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Children's Agenda report also found uneven funding for the CCAP among NYS counties. New York City suburbs and larger upstate counties receive significantly more funding per income eligible child than other parts of the state. Chautauqua County's allocation for 2024-2025 results in \$642 per eligible child. In comparison, the allocation to Nassau County is \$2,159 per income eligible child.

## TRENDS/DIRECTIONS

Governor Hochul is proposing several initiatives to address childcare issues at the state level, including:

- The Executive Budget includes a proposed \$110 million Child Care Construction Fund to expand and improve childcare facilities. The fund will provide grants to non-profit, for-profit, and school-age childcare programs to build new sites or repair existing ones, with a portion reserved for family childcare providers to make renovations. OCFS will also offer technical assistance to help these small businesses access the funding.
- The Governor is proposing a "Substitute Pool" of vetted professionals to step in when childcare staff are absent. This initiative will improve reliability for families, reduce disruptions in care, and support providers by easing staffing challenges while strengthening the childcare workforce pipeline.
- The state is launching the New York Coalition for Child Care, a partnership of business, labor, financial experts, and providers. The coalition will focus on creating a sustainable path to universal childcare by strengthening the childcare assistance system and expanding affordable, high-quality options for middle-class families not covered by current subsidies.



## COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS

### Community Needs Survey

COI's 2025 Community Needs Survey (Appendix I) asked respondents about the challenges they have faced when looking for childcare. Parents who searched for care in the past year described the process as challenging and time-consuming, with many hitting multiple roadblocks at once.

The most common barriers were exactly what we'd expect locally: not enough open slots, schedules that don't match work hours, age-specific gaps (especially infants/toddlers), programs that were too far away, concerns about quality, and difficulty finding licensed/registered providers. Families also noted cost, uncertainty about how to even start their search, transportation hurdles, and trouble locating specialized supports when a child had unique needs.

What matters most to families when choosing a provider is consistent across responses: the program's safety practices and licensing/registration status, the provider's experience and qualifications, cleanliness, location close to home or work, and simply whether care is available during the hours they need. Recommendations or references from someone they trust also carry real weight, and some families look for healthy meals, a preferred language, smaller group sizes, or accommodations for special needs.

Awareness of the New York State Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) is not well-known, but is improving. Several

respondents indicated they were unfamiliar and wanted clearer guidance on eligibility and how to apply, highlighting the need for more outreach.

#### COI Board of Directors

In group discussions that were held as part of a retreat in 2025 (Appendix II), members of COI's Board of Directors discussed the challenges for families needing childcare in Chautauqua County. They brought up many of the same challenges that are supported by the data, including a lack of available childcare slots and the high cost of care, which many families find unaffordable. In addition, some parents perceive that there is stigma when seeking or accepting financial assistance for childcare. Many families also lack support from relatives or extended family members who could help with child supervision, and there are very limited options for childcare during non-traditional work hours, making it especially difficult for parents working evenings, nights, or weekends to find consistent and reliable care.

The Board also discussed potential reasons for Chautauqua County's shortage of childcare providers. Some felt that the high costs that often outweigh potential profits, and the many regulations associated with operating a childcare business make it difficult for providers to sustain operations. There is also a shortage of qualified workers, as the required credentials and responsibilities can be demanding compared to the pay offered. Additionally, the liability and insurance costs associated with caring for other people's children deter some from entering the field. Above all, the need to ensure children's safety and maintain the trust of parents sets a high standard that not all potential providers feel equipped to meet, further limiting the number of available childcare options.

## STRENGTHS AND OPPORTUNITIES

- COI operates the Child Care Council of Chautauqua County with Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) funding through OCFS. The Council provides technical assistance and resources for childcare providers, as well as help for families with locating childcare that meets their needs.
- The Child Care Assistance Program is available to provide subsidies that help families access affordable childcare. Recent increases in eligibility income limits allow more families to qualify for the program.
- The Early Care and Learning Council (ECLC) coordinates New York's network of Child Care Resource & Referral agencies. They recently implemented 4 new initiatives:
  - The state's Infant & Toddler Network operates through seven regional technical-assistance centers. In 2024, ECLC reported that 55 Infant Toddler Specialists provided 3,960+ hours of technical assistance statewide. They also upgraded the MITCH data system for improved data tracking and reporting by CCR&Rs.
  - Infant–Toddler Mental Health is a statewide consultation project funded by OCFS and operated in partnership with Docs for Tots and the NY Center for Child Development. After a successful pilot, the project has scaled up and added a common quality tool (IT-CHILD) as an assessment tool to measure social-emotional climate in childcare settings. 2024 data show 359 active cases, 3,453 children served, 3,618 consultative visits, and 5,610 hours of consultation, with consultants trained for reliability on the tool and now using it in practice.



- ECLC’s Business Navigator provides employers with a step-by-step playbook on assessing the childcare needs of employees, identifying solutions, and tapping tax benefits. The project is delivered with CCR&Rs and Regional Economic Development Councils. ECLC highlights an interactive mapping base of 18,000+ providers to support this work and has been rolling the toolkit out statewide.
- The Empire State Family Child Care Collaborative supports family and group family childcare programs with business coaching, referrals, and practical tools—including a free child management system to cut administrative time and strengthen operations. Providers join at no cost and work with designated staff/consultants through their CCR&R region.

## CHALLENGES

- The supply of childcare slots in Chautauqua County is insufficient for the need. The county is short on infant/toddler seats, care during evenings/weekends, and options in rural tracts that are childcare deserts. Families who qualify for assistance can’t always find an open slot near home or work. While the big jump in Legally Exempt caregivers helped to fill some gaps, it didn’t solve the core shortage of licensed slots.
- The childcare workforce is facing a shortage. Programs can’t open rooms or keep them open without stable staffing. Wages are low, turnover is high, and hiring takes time. Even small staffing disruptions ripple into closed classrooms and longer waitlists. Staffing costs combined with costs for insurance, food, supplies, and utilities force many providers to operate on razor-thin margins or close completely.
- Childcare costs outpace family budgets. Childcare now rivals housing costs for many families. Changes to CCAP eligibility have made a real difference, but there must be enough slots to use the help. Also, administrative paperwork and processing times



## NEEDS / RECOMMENDATIONS

- The community needs additional childcare options that more closely match the demand for care, especially for infant-toddler slots and care during non-traditional hours.
- Providers need quick access to behavioral/mental health consultation, behavior coaching, and hands-on help. Toolkits such as visuals, sensory materials, and transition routines; as well as quick win plans sent to families in plain language.
- Providers need predictable reimbursement, clean billing, and help with the “back office” (pricing, budgeting, payroll, grants). Start-up and expansion capital is hard to secure, especially for home-based programs that could add infant seats with a second adult or minor renovations.
- Families need help with knowing where to start to look for childcare, who to call, and how CCAP works. They need

to know that help is available through the Child Care Council.

- Employers need simple, ready-to-use options (reserved slots, stipends, back-up care) that help them provide assistance with childcare to their employees. Identify employers to pilot reserved infant/toddler slots with nearby providers (employer stipend + CCAP where eligible).
- The community needs improvements to the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) that make it easier to access and fully expend the funds allotted to the county. Recommendations are to:
  - Hold enrollment events with on-site eligibility determination, document scanning, and matching to providers in one visit.
  - Use text for updates, requests for missing forms and recertification reminders.
  - Use plain language forms and guidance documents.
  - Set a county service standard (e.g., claims paid within 14 days of approval); run quarterly billing clean-ups to reduce denials.



# 5. Youth

## INTRODUCTION

Positive Youth Development (PYD) is a framework for helping youth to grow into healthy, productive adults. A wealth of evidence cited by the U.S. Administration for Children and Families identifies the protective factors, or positive influences, essential for equipping youth to face the challenges of adolescence and adulthood, including:

- Physical and psychological safety and security
- Clear expectations for behavior and opportunities to make decisions
- Connections with peers that support healthy behaviors
- Connections with caring adults
- A sense of belonging and personal value
- Opportunities to develop positive social values and norms
- Skill building and mastery
- Opportunities to make a contribution to community and develop a sense of mattering
- Strong links between family, school, and community resources

In Chautauqua County, most youth have access to some of these protective factors through their ties to family, school, and community. Quality programming is available through various youth service providers, offering opportunities for young people to enhance their skills and build positive connections. However, there is room for growth in these opportunities to better meet demand.

Despite this, a significant number of young individuals in Chautauqua County face challenges due to living in poverty-stricken or dangerous households. Some are forced to leave the family home for various reasons and become homeless while they are struggling with the trials of adolescence. Others experience abuse, neglect, and even sexual exploitation. For these youth in crisis, programs and services that incorporate intensive trauma-informed practices are critical.

## DEMOGRAPHICS AND STATISTICS

**Chart 5.1** provides data regarding numbers of children and youth in Chautauqua County, as reported by the American Community Survey 5-Year estimates published by the US Census Bureau. In 2020, children and youth up to the age of 24 represented 30.0% of the county's total population, which saw a slight decline to 29.9% in 2023. Over this three-year span, the number of youth decreased across all age groups, with the exception of an increase in children aged 5 to 9.

The race and ethnicity of children under the age of 18 in Chautauqua County are illustrated in **Table 5.1**. There has been a slight increase in the percentage of children and youth who identify as persons of color compared to the 2020 census data. Specifically, those identifying as "two or more races" rose from 7.1% of the under-18 population in 2020 to 10.7% in 2023. Additionally, the Hispanic population within this age group increased from 13.6% in 2020 to 16.2% in 2023.

Chart 5.1 Chautauqua County Children and Youth by Age Group, 2020 and 2023

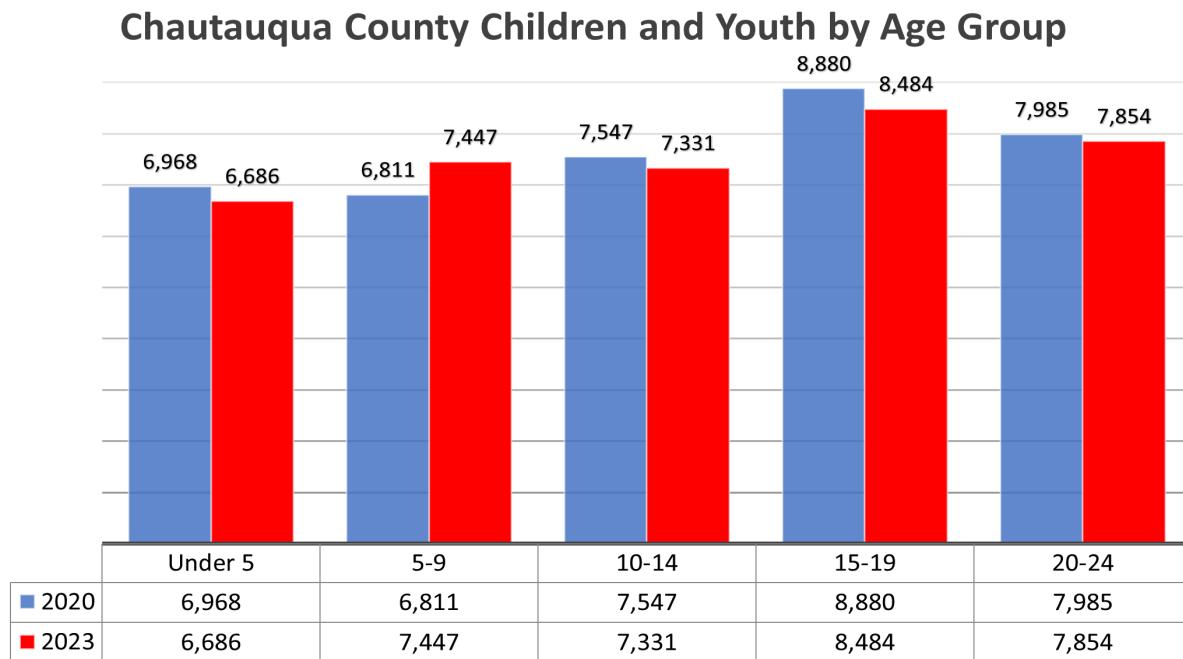


Table 5.1 Race and Ethnicity of Youth &lt;18 in Chautauqua County 2020 and 2023

	2020	2023
<b>One Race</b>	<b>92.9%</b>	<b>89.3%</b>
White	86.7%	81.0%
Black/African American	2.8%	3.1%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	.2%	.5%
Asian	.2%	.6%
Hawaiian/ Other Pacific Islander	0%	0%
Some other race	2.9%	4.1%
<b>Two or More Races</b>	<b>7.1%</b>	<b>10.7%</b>
<b>Hispanic or Latino (of any race)</b>	<b>13.6%</b>	<b>16.2%</b>
<b>White alone, not Hispanic or Latino</b>	<b>78.5%</b>	<b>74.4%</b>

In Chautauqua County, 58.4% of all children under 18 live in married couple households, 30.7% live in a household with a single female head of household, and 9.9% live in households with a single male householder.

As illustrated in **Table 5.2**, census information from 2023 reveals that there are 2,170 grandparents that are living in the same household with their own grandchildren under age 18 in the county. In 1,159 of these situations, the parent is not present and the grandparent(s) are responsible for caring for the children. The percentage of multigenerational households in which the grandparent is responsible for the children increased from 24.1% to 53.4% in the three-year time period.

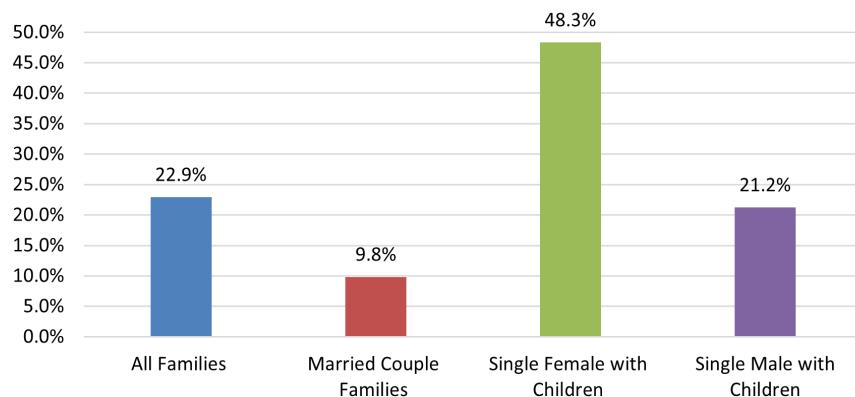
Table 5.2 Grandparents in same household as grandchildren, Chautauqua County

	2020	2023
# Grandparents living in same household with grandchildren	2,050	2,170
# Grandparents living in the same household and responsible for children (no parent present)	494	1,159

For the population overall in Chautauqua County, 17.0% is living in poverty (2023 U.S. Census Bureau ACS 5-Year Estimates). However, many of the county's residents who are in poverty are in families with children, as documented by the much higher poverty rate for families with children under age 18 (22.9%). For all children under the age of 18, the poverty rate is 23.1%. The poverty rate for families varies by the type of household in which they live, as illustrated in **Chart 5.2**. Children of single parents, especially children of single mothers, are much more likely to live in poverty than children living with two married parents.

Chart 5.2 Children under 18 in Poverty in Chautauqua County by Family Type

Children &lt;18 in Poverty in Chautauqua Co. by Family Type



## Education

The data presented in **Table 5.3** highlights the educational attainment of youth aged 18 to 24 in Chautauqua County, in comparison to New York State and national averages. In comparison to NY State, Chautauqua County exhibits a higher percentage of individuals in this age group who have not completed high school compared to New York State, although the county's rate aligns closely with the national average. The percentages of young adults who have completed high school (or equivalency) reflect a similar trend. Nearly half of county residents aged 18–24 have completed at least some college or obtained an Associate's degree. However, residents in this age group significantly trail behind both the state and national figures when it comes to earning a Bachelor's degree or higher.

Table 5.3 Educational Attainment for Ages 18 to 24 years

	Chautauqua County	NY State	United States
Less than high school graduate	11.7%	9.7%	11.6%
High School graduate (or equivalency)	34.5%	29.5%	34.6%
Some college or Associate's degree	46.7%	41.8%	40.9%
Bachelor's degree or higher	7.1%	19.1%	12.9%

Table 5.4 Educational Attainment for Ages 25+

	Chautauqua County	NY State	United States
Less than 9th grade	3.9%	6.0%	4.7%
Less than high school graduate	6.1%	6.2%	5.9%
High School graduate (or equivalency)	33.0%	24.6%	26.2%
Some college, no degree	17.1%	14.9%	19.4%
Associate's degree	14.8%	8.9%	8.8%
Bachelor's degree or higher	25.1%	39.5%	35.0%

**Table 5.4** shows the educational attainment of the adult population over the age of 24, as reported by the Census Bureau. In this age group, Chautauqua County shows higher percentages of high school completion when compared to both the state and the nation. Also, Chautauqua County has a greater percentage of its over-25 population that has attended some college or obtained an Associate's degree, but residents in this age group still lag behind the state and the nation for earning higher education degrees.

The New York State Education Department publishes report cards for each public school district, as well as aggregate data at the county level ([data.nysesd.gov](http://data.nysesd.gov)). **Table 5.5** compares student demographic data from the 2023-2024 school year to the previous two years for all 18 Chautauqua County public school districts combined. The data reveal a slight decline in enrollment, with rates of English Language Learners that have remained fairly stable. Numbers and percentages of students with disabilities and homeless children have all increased from year to year. The number of students who are considered economically disadvantaged increased from 2021-2022 to 2022-2023 but remained relatively stable in 2023-2024.

Table 5.5 Chautauqua County Student Demographics

	2021-2022		2022-2023		2023-2024	
<b>K-12 Enrollment</b>	17,041		16,862		16,641	
English Language Learners	623	3.7%	594	3.5%	618	3.7%
Students with Disabilities	2,710	15.9%	2,790	16.6%	2,854	17.2%
Economically Disadvantaged	10,250	60.2%	10,523	62.4%	10,381	62.4%
Homeless	95	.6%	243	1.4%	270	1.6%

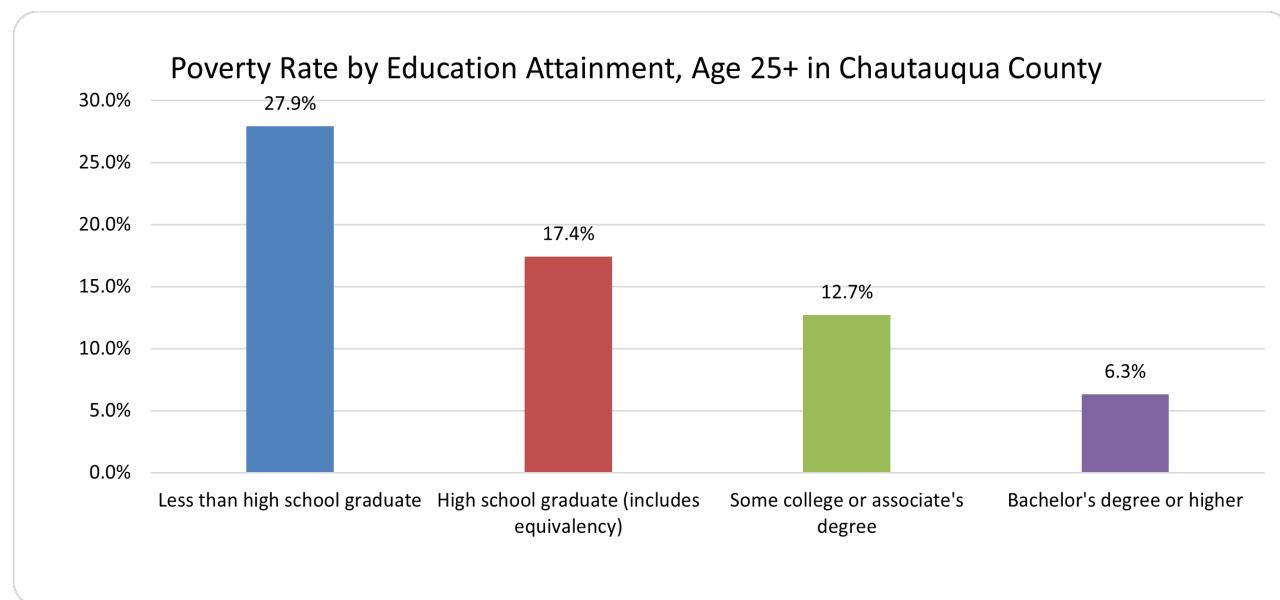
Graduation rates from the NYS School Report Card are illustrated in **Table 5.6** for the cohort of students who were freshman in the 2019-2020 school year with an anticipated graduation in 2023. All groups of students in the table show lower graduation rates in comparison to statewide averages, with the exception of Native American students (who have a slightly higher rate than the state) and those who are not economically disadvantaged (rate is equal to the NYS rate). Disparities are also apparent among racial and ethnic groups within the county. Graduation rates are lower than those of the White student majority for all races except Asian students. It should be noted that the Asian population is much smaller than other racial groups in the county, as seen in **Table 5.1**. Students who are economically disadvantaged graduated at a much lower rate than those who are not considered economically disadvantaged. Very low graduation rates are seen among students who are learning English and students who have experienced homelessness during the school year.

Table 5.6 Chautauqua County 2021 Public High School Graduation Rates by Race/Ethnicity, Freshman Cohort

	Chautauqua County	New York State
All Students	83%	86%
White	87%	91%
Black/African American	78%	81%
Native American	83%	81%
Asian/Native Hawaiian/ Other Pacific Islander	91%	93%
Multi-Racial	74%	84%
Hispanic/Latino	70%	81%
Economically Disadvantaged	76%	82%
Not Economically Disadvantaged	92%	92%
English Language Learners	39%	57%
Homeless	50%	69%

Research has shown an association between higher educational attainment and higher earnings. The correlation between educational attainment and poverty in Chautauqua County is evident in census data, as shown in **Chart 5.3**. While 27.9% of Chautauqua County residents who have not graduated high school live in poverty, the rate of poverty is just 6.3% for those with a Bachelor's degree or higher. (U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey 2023 data)

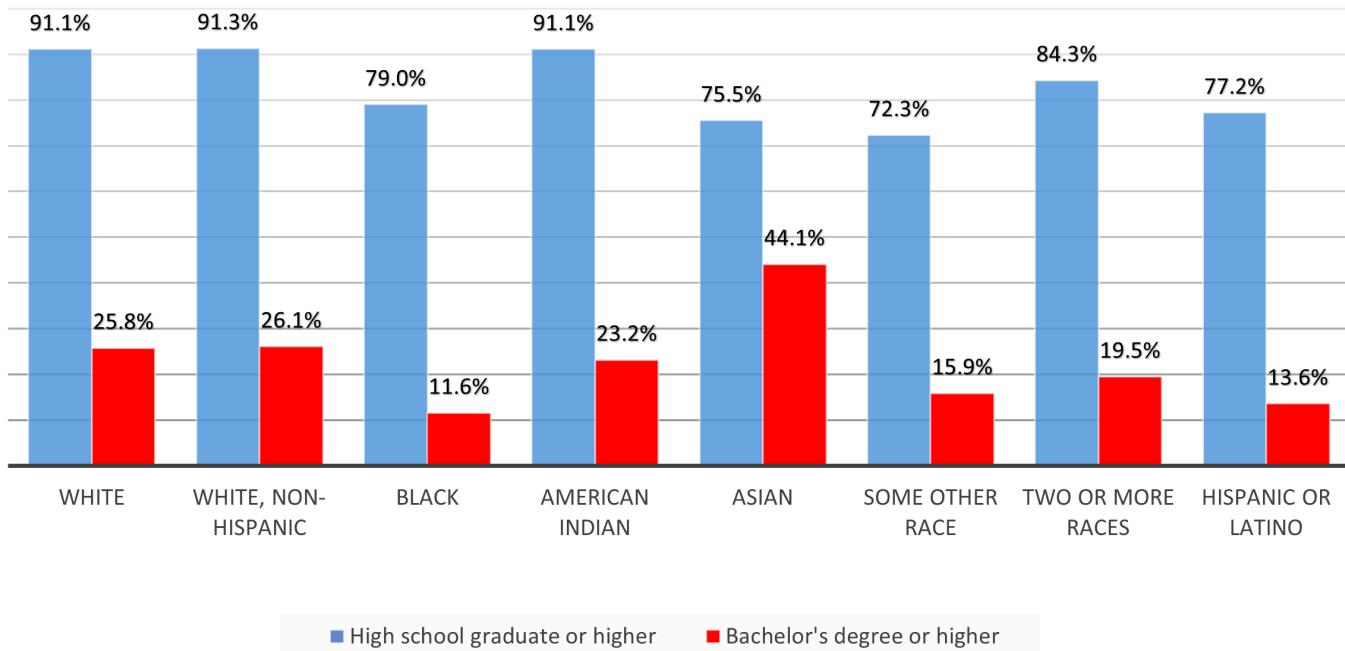
Chart 5.3 Poverty Rate by Educational Attainment in Chautauqua County



**Chart 5.4** illustrates the racial and ethnic disparities with regard to educational attainment among Chautauqua County's population over the age of 25. White, non-Hispanic individuals in the county graduate high school in higher proportion than all other racial and ethnic populations. White individuals, whether or not they are of Hispanic ethnicity, attain at least a Bachelor's degree more often than minorities. One exception is the Asian population, who attain Bachelor's degrees or higher in greater percentages than Whites, but who exist in much smaller numbers in the county.

Chart 5.4 Race/Ethnicity by Educational Attainment in Chautauqua County, 2023

### Race/Ethnicity by Educational Attainment, Age 25+, Chautauqua County



It is worth noting that the census data above does not take into account the completion of vocational programs that prepare students for careers in various trades. A number of initiatives exist in Chautauqua County that are aimed at preparing young people for technical and manufacturing careers that are in demand. Many have outreach initiatives that specifically target the involvement of young women and girls. JCC operates a Manufacturing Technology Institute that trains students in advanced skills on actual equipment they will encounter in local industry jobs. Manufacturer's Association of the Southern Tier is focused on prosperity and growth of the manufacturing sector. They partner with Dream It Do It, Western NY to promote manufacturing as a career choice with a focus on inspiring youth to attain the advanced skills needed in the workforce. Several local public schools are offering courses in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) fields to promote careers in the industry by providing hands-on learning. The Western NY P-TECH Academy, operated by the Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) also provides education in skilled trades to prepare students for high demand careers. A high level of collaboration exists among these programs and local schools to ensure youth are aware of advanced manufacturing options when making career choices. The Cassadaga Job Corps also offers education and job training for low-income students ages 16-24.

#### At-Risk Youth

A number of issues exist in Chautauqua County that point to a critical need to engage youth who are disconnected from family or community, or otherwise at risk. Some of the indicators of risk in Chautauqua County that have been compiled by the NYS Council on Children and Families Kids' Well-Being Indicators Clearinghouse (KWIC) are listed below:

- 31.7% of Chautauqua County children ages 0-17 received SNAP benefits in 2022, compared to the state average of 22.8%.
- 7.2% of Chautauqua County children ages 0-17 received public assistance in 2022, compared to the NYS average of 5.6%
- 59.0% of Chautauqua County children in grades K-12 in public schools were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch in the 2022/2023 school year, an indicator of high poverty.

- The rate of hospitalizations for self-inflicted injuries for youth ages 15-19 in Chautauqua County was 250.9 per 100,000 youth in this age group for the three-year period 2018-2020, compared to 111.8 per 100,000 for NY State.
- The rate of children ages 0-17 in indicated cases of child abuse and maltreatment is 27.6 per 1,000 in Chautauqua County for 2022, compared to 12.2 per 1,000 for all of NY State.

### Youth Services

The Chautauqua County Department of Health and Human Services provides the majority of government-based services for at-risk children and youth in the county. These include preventive services and foster care provided by Juvenile Services and Independent Living Teams, as well as Child Protective Services (CPS) that investigates reports concerning the abuse or maltreatment of children. Foster care services provide nurturing homes to children on a temporary basis when their parents are unable to care for them. Children are placed in foster homes in situations where they have been removed from their own families due to abuse, neglect or other family problems that endanger their safety.

The Chautauqua County Department of Health and Human Services 2022 Annual Report provides the data displayed in **Table 5.7**.

*Table 5.7 Chautauqua County Health and Human Services Youth Data*

	2021	2022
<b>Juvenile Justice</b>		
Persons in Need of Supervision (PINS)	103	155
Juvenile Delinquents	10	12
Juveniles in NYS OCFS Custody	4	1
<b>Child Protective Services</b>		
Reports of child maltreatment	2,948	3,002
Reports resulting in investigations	2,378	2,499
Indicated Reports of Abuse/Neglect	397	346
<b>Custodial Care</b>		
In Foster Homes	56	56
In Institutions	3	4
In Group Homes	4	3
In Therapeutic Foster Homes	24	26
Total children in custodial care	87	89

Service providers funded by the Chautauqua County Youth Bureau served 5,805 children and youth in 2022. Some of the youth programs available in Chautauqua County include tutoring services provided by Chautauqua Striders; work readiness and life skills programs available from the WCD Boys and Girls Club of Jamestown; mentoring, tutoring, and healthy lifestyles activities from the Boys and Girls Club of Northern Chautauqua County; afterschool and youth development programming, sports, and recreation activities available from the Eastside Family YMCA and the YMCA of Jamestown; and summer recreation programs provided by local cities and townships.

Several 4-H Clubs exist throughout the county, which are made up of nearly 500 members. 4-H is directed by Cornell Cooperative Extension of Chautauqua County. In addition to animal education classes in which youth raise and care for an animal from birth, youth also gain valuable life lessons through various home and career-focused programs.

Youth employment programs offered by Chautauqua Works (the county's Workforce Investment Board) provide career assessment, exploration, and counseling; connections to local training and apprenticeships; assistance with resumes, job applications, and interviewing; and connections to work experience and summer youth employment opportunities.

Safe Harbour: NY is a program that implements a system-level approach within existing child welfare and allied youth-serving systems, including Runaway-Homeless Youth programs (RHY), Probation, Persons In Need of Supervision

(PINS), Youth Bureaus, and other critical partners. This approach leverages existing system strengths to create a more effective and efficient response to youth who have experienced commercial sexual exploitation or child trafficking (CSEC), or who are vulnerable to it. Locally, the Safe Harbour program is administered by the Child Advocacy Program using a trauma-informed care approach. They have provided the following data for the period 2016 through July 2025 in Chautauqua County:

- 473 youth have been referred to the Safe Harbour program
- 87 youth meet the federal definition of human trafficking
- 264 youth are considered to be at high risk for trafficking/CSEC
- The average age of referral to the Safe Harbour program is 13.94 years old

Chautauqua Opportunities, Inc. operates residential programs for homeless youth with federal, state, and local funding. These include the Safe House runaway and homeless youth shelter (children and youth under age 18) and the Transitional Independent Living Program (for homeless youth ages 16-22). The Safe House and two Transitional Independent Living facilities are licensed by the NYS Office of Children and Family Services. These two programs typically serve over 120 homeless and at-risk youth annually.

The following data reveals some of the problems faced by the 93 youth who were served at the Safe House from 9/30/2024 – 9/29/2025.

- 100% of youth reported that they or a family member experienced abuse or neglect at home.
- 39% of youth reported that they or a family member have mental health problems such as depression or anxiety.
- 45% of youth reported usage of alcohol/drugs
- 88% of youth had involvement with Child Protective Services
- 15% of youth were referred for services to address human trafficking
- 10% of youth received treatment for suicide ideation
- Additional data regarding the homeless youth population in Chautauqua County can be found in the Housing Chapter.

## TRENDS AND DIRECTIONS

As the population of Chautauqua County has continued to decline, children identifying as persons of color have become a greater percentage of the enrolled school population. Non-white youth continue to be disproportionately affected by both poverty and low educational attainment. Graduation rates in the county, particularly for minorities and disadvantaged students, lag behind NYS averages. Black, Hispanic, and multi-racial students graduate high school at significantly lower rates than White students. Educational attainment is highly correlated to future prospects of economic stability with poverty rates significantly lower for people who earn a Bachelor's degree versus those who receive a high school diploma or do not graduate from high school.

The poverty rates for children and for families in Chautauqua County continue to be much higher than those of the total population. Food insecurity continues, yet the federal government is proposing significant cuts to the SNAP

(Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) that is a critical support for many children, families, and seniors in the county. The potential impacts of SNAP reductions include increased food insecurity, poorer health outcomes from a lack of nutrition, and a strain on state resources as they try to fill the funding gap.

New in the 2025-2026 school year, public schools in NY State are required to provide breakfast and lunch to all students at no cost. The Universal Free School Meals Program ensures that all students have access to nutritious meals, whether or not the family is able to pay. Schools will be reimbursed for meals by the state. This approach improves students' ability to learn by decreasing hunger, reduces the burden on schools of having to manage an income-based eligibility system, and eliminates labeling of students as low-income since they will no longer be singled out.

Other trends include the rate of child abuse and maltreatment that is higher in Chautauqua County than the statewide average. Substance abuse in the county among young parents has impacted the number of grandparents who are responsible for caring for their grandchildren, which more than doubled between 2020 and 2023. Data indicate that many of Chautauqua County's young people have challenges related to poverty or poor school performance. Some cannot live safely with a parent for various reasons or have been forced to leave their home due to turmoil within the family. Homeless youth may end up in contact with law enforcement or in the child welfare or juvenile justice systems. Outreach programs exist to engage disconnected, at-risk youth and connect them to available services, but these resources are not enough to meet the need.

## COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS

There is no question that involvement in community activities helps youth to value their community, provides constructive use of their time, and helps youth build positive relationships with adults and peers. A lack of engagement in meaningful activities can put young people at risk for involvement in criminal activity, substance abuse, or premature sexual activity. Opportunities for youth involvement do exist in the county through extracurricular school activities, recreational and sports programs, and organizations such as Boys & Girls Clubs, Scouts BSA, Girl Scouts, 4-H, and others. Disconnected youth in particular are vulnerable to at-risk behavior and would benefit from programs that encourage and facilitate involvement in community activities.

Chautauqua Opportunities, Inc.'s 2025 Community Needs Survey (Appendix I) asked responders to rate the availability of certain services and opportunities for youth in the county. Key findings of this area of the survey are:

- Mental/behavioral health services (counseling, crisis services, substance use prevention) are the most pressing unmet needs.
- Youth development supports (mentoring, tutoring, after school, leadership, career counseling) are perceived as both limited (not enough to meet the need) and not well-known.
- Recreational and sports programs are relatively more available, but still insufficient for demand.
- Awareness is a major barrier: many people simply do not know whether programs exist. This is particularly true for pregnancy prevention programs, career counseling, and civics/leadership opportunities.

The 2025 CNA Survey also asked community members about issues or concerns for young people in their household over the past 12 months. Of those who indicated there were issues, "emotional or behavioral problems" was the most commonly reported issue (18.3%), again highlighting a strong need for mental health and behavioral support services for youth. Bullying was nearly as prevalent as emotional/behavioral problems (16.9%), suggesting peer conflicts and school safety are ongoing challenges. Substance-related issues (alcohol, smoking/vaping, drugs) and risky behaviors (sexual activity, skipping school) were reported at moderate levels (7% - 9%). More severe outcomes (gang involvement, running away, violent behavior) were reported by fewer responders (4% - 5%) but remain important concerns.

## STRENGTHS

- A variety of positive youth development programs are available throughout the county.

- Local accredited education programs are available for earning post-secondary degrees and certificates, as well as vocational skills.
- Several youth-serving organizations have staff members who are trained in the trauma-informed care approach.
- The NY State Universal Free School Meals Program ensures that all public school students have access to nutritious meals free of cost to their family.

## CHALLENGES

- Rates of poverty for children and youth remain high, particularly for single parent families.
- Chautauqua County has high rates of child abuse and neglect.
- High rates parents who are unable to care for their children result in elevated numbers of grandparents who are caring for grandchildren.
- Racial and ethnic minorities have disproportionate rates of high school completion and attainment of higher education compared to non-minorities.
- Looming cuts to the SNAP will lead to increased food insecurity for children and families

## NEEDS / RECOMMENDATIONS

- Families need parenting education services that teach appropriate discipline, the importance of quality family engagement, and emotional coping skills.
- The community needs increased behavioral and mental health services for youth.
- The community needs to expand youth development programs and other opportunities to engage youth in meaningful activities.
- The community needs to sustain government and community-based mandated reporter services to ensure child maltreatment is addressed.
- Agencies need to expand and continue trauma-informed services to address the needs of victims of child maltreatment and sexual exploitation.
- Agencies need to continue to secure funding for assistance programs for disadvantaged families and youth.

# 6. Transportation

## INTRODUCTION

The availability of reliable, affordable transportation is one of the most critical issues faced by low-income people in Chautauqua County. The rural nature of the county presents transportation challenges for those seeking employment or needing medical attention, as the majority of jobs and health-related services are located in the two major urban areas of Jamestown and Dunkirk. The public depends heavily on a well-developed, affordable, transportation system to be able to access employment opportunities and health care, and to shop for necessities.

Transportation is also a key issue in local economic development efforts. The availability of highway, rail, and air transportation is a determining factor in a business's decisions to locate or expand into Chautauqua County.

## DEMOGRAPHICS and STATISTICS

Chautauqua County is a predominately rural county with 1,062 square miles of land area. It is the 13th largest of New York's 62 counties and is located the furthest west on the shores of Lake Erie. The Chautauqua County Division of Transportation is responsible for 552 center-line miles of roads, 308 bridges, and 258 major culverts that make up the county-owned highway system. In terms of the highway system, Interstate 86 runs east/west through the county, while Interstate 90 runs parallel to Lake Erie beginning in Ripley and heading east to Erie County. State Route 60 is a major route that connects the north and south ends of the county.

### Private Transportation

Private vehicles are the primary source of transportation in Chautauqua County. As shown in **Table 6.1**, data from the Census Bureau's 2023 American Community Survey illustrate the relative importance of privately owned vehicles as a means of getting to work in Chautauqua County compared to New York State.

*Table 6.1 Means of Transportation to Work*

Means of Transportation to Work	Chautauqua County	New York State
Drive alone	76.5%	49.7%
Carpool	10.1%	6.3%
Public transportation (including taxicabs)	0.5%	22.4%
Walk	3.9%	5.7%
Other means	2.0%	2.6%
Work at home	7.0%	13.3%

On average, employees in Chautauqua County have shorter commute times (19.3 minutes) than the average U.S. worker (26.6 minutes). A small percentage of the workforce in Chautauqua County (2.02%) has "super commutes" in excess of 90 minutes.

Census data from the 2023 American Community Survey indicate that 10.9% of households in Chautauqua County have no personal vehicle available. The costs of owning a vehicle are prohibitive for some families. In addition to the vehicle purchase price, there are costs for registration, inspection, maintenance, insurance, and gasoline that must be considered. Families with young children are also required by NYS law to have child safety seats.

## Bus Service

The CHQ Transit System (formally CARTS) is a county-operated transportation system that provides fixed and on-demand routes throughout Chautauqua County. Fixed route services are offered within the more urbanized areas of Jamestown and Dunkirk, and the Villages of Celoron, Falconer, Lakewood, and Fredonia. A wide variety of routes span all of Chautauqua County – Ripley to Silver Creek, Jamestown to Dunkirk and other rural areas. Their services are fee-based and are open to the public. They offer Dial-a-Ride (door-to-door or curb-to-curb) service for individuals with disabilities, and each bus is equipped with a lift for wheelchair access or for those who are unable to climb stairs. Bike racks are also on every bus.



Several bus companies that are based outside of the county operate along major routes and have regular stops in the more populated areas. Coach USA maintains a bus service out of Erie, PA and operates regularly scheduled routes between Jamestown, Olean (Cattaraugus County) and Buffalo (Erie County). The Cedar Bus Co., based in Erie County, offers group charters and individual transport by scheduling in advance. Their buses are equipped with wheelchair lifts. D&F Travel provides deluxe coach tours, local shuttles, and charter services.

Some of the schools in the county use bus companies to transport their students daily and for off-site trips, instead of maintaining their own fleets of buses. Companies currently include First Student (Northern Chautauqua County), Corvus Bus and Charter (Jamestown). The Student Association of SUNY at Fredonia offers a Campus Community shuttle that can be accessed on campus and at nearby stops off campus. A shuttle service is also available at Fredonia Place for residents.

## Medical Transportation

Much of Chautauqua County has a significant senior population, with 28.7% of its residents over 60 years old. The Senior population is generally economically poorer and includes a higher percentage of people with disabilities compared to the population statewide. These are all indicators of the need for reliable and affordable transportation for the high numbers of residents needing access to medical care.

Chautauqua County has been designated as a Health Professional Shortage Area by the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration. Residents often must drive long distances to access medical specialists, such as those that are available in Buffalo, NY or Erie, PA.

Individuals with disabilities and others needing transportation to medical appointments may utilize providers that have accessible vehicles, such as CHQ Transit. Those who are enrolled in Medicaid may schedule trips through the Medicaid Answering Service (MAS), the Medicaid broker. Medicaid will pay for the most medically appropriate and cost-effective level of transportation to and from services that are covered by Medicaid. This can include mileage reimbursement for using a personal vehicle or taxi service, bus passes provided by a local case worker, or ambulette/ambulance services. MAS will also arrange long-distance trips out of town when medically necessary and when the medical care is not available within the individual's local area.

Chautauqua Works, along with The Resource Center, continues to work toward a Chautauqua County Transportation Work Plan in collaboration with CHQ Transit, elected officials, community organizations, service providers, and other stakeholders to plan for access to transportation for all who need it.

Other agencies providing medical transportation services include:

- The Chautauqua County Veterans Service Agency provides a free van service for veterans to the VA Hospital in Buffalo that is scheduled through CHQ Transit.
- The American Cancer Society has a Road to Recovery Program, which uses volunteers to provide transportation to cancer patients for medical visits.

- TEAM Services Medical Transportation provides non-emergency medical transportation, such as for doctor appointments, hospital discharges, and physical therapy appointments. They have wheelchair accessible vans and minivans. They serve Chautauqua County NY, as well as Erie and Warren counties in PA.
- RO Foundation assists local medical patients with major illnesses and their families with monies to offset the cost associated with transportation to and from medical appointments from treatments. Patients must meet certain eligibility requirements and complete an application with a doctor's signature.
- Emergency medical transportation response is provided by WCA Ambulance Services and Alstar Ambulance. Chautauqua County EMS provides lifesaving emergency response in conjunction with local volunteer and career fire services. STAT MedEvac, a large air-medical transportation system, provides 24/7 air ambulance coverage from a base at UPMC Chautauqua in Jamestown, ensuring critical air medical transport services for the region.
- Amish Emergency Transport provides travel and support for urgent needs and scheduled appointments for Amish communities across Western New York and Northwestern Pennsylvania.
- Heritage Ministries (Gerry Homes) provides non-emergency medical transportation within Chautauqua County using wheelchair accessible vans, which may be scheduled through MAS.
- TEAM Services Inc. provides fee-based non-emergency medical transportation and is also a provider for MAS and other insurances.
- True Transportation Services provides non-emergency medical transportation to doctor's appointments, private rides, and airport trips for a fee.

### Taxis and Ridesharing

There is only one cab company in the county that operates from Jamestown. Scheduling is made easier by mobile applications that allow riders to schedule a taxi from their smartphone. Uber and Lyft ride sharing services are also available in Chautauqua County. These drivers use their own vehicles to transport passengers. There are two rental car options in Chautauqua County. One is located in Gerry, NY and the other operates in both Lakewood and Dunkirk. Scheduling can be done by mobile applications or in-person reservations.



### Airports

Chautauqua County operates two public general aviation airports; the Jamestown Airport (JHW) and the Dunkirk Airport (DKK). Each airport provides a wide range of general and business aviation services, including flight instruction, charter services, fueling services, maintenance services, hangar rentals, deicing, and other essential services. Traditional Fixed Base Operator services are provided through a contracted third-party Fixed Base Operator. Centric Aviation is the FBO lease-operator at both airports. A detailed description of flight line services, fees and hours of operation can be found on their website: <https://centricaviation.com>

Chautauqua County's airports provide access for flight operations year-round. Attended hours of operation and available services are published online at: [https://www.faa.gov/air\\_traffic/flight\\_info/aeronav/Aero\\_Data/Airport\\_Data/](https://www.faa.gov/air_traffic/flight_info/aeronav/Aero_Data/Airport_Data/)

Neither airport offers commercial airline service, but both are used by private pilots and business partners. Chautauqua County residents needing commercial air service most often travel to Buffalo-Niagara International Airport

or Erie International Airport to access flights by major airlines. Both airports are 50 to 100 miles from Chautauqua County, depending on the starting point.

The Federal Express office is located next to the terminal building at the Jamestown Airport, and the local Civil Air Patrol unit meets there weekly. A Flight School is available at both airports that is run by Jamestown Aviation, Co., LLC.

### Railroads

Amtrak service crosses the country, but riders from Chautauqua County must travel to Buffalo, Depew, or Erie, PA to embark. Amtrak offers bus travel from Dunkirk, Fredonia, and Jamestown to their stops via the NYS Thruway.

There are six railroad companies that provide freight service to southwestern NY State and northwestern Pennsylvania: Norfolk Southern Railway, Canadian Pacific, CSX Transportation, Western New York and Pennsylvania Railroad, Buffalo and Pittsburgh Railroad, and New York and Lake Erie.

### Bikes and Walkways

E-Bikes are becoming more prevalent throughout Chautauqua County. Currently there are no required safety regulations. Several townships and villages throughout the county are looking into establishing local laws for E-bikes to ensure the safety of residents.

There are various trails and bikeways throughout the county used for hiking, cycling, cross country skiing, snowmobiling and other recreational purposes. Chautauqua County maintains the 43-mile Overland Trails system comprising the Earl Cadot Eastside Overland Trail and the Fred J. Cusimano Westside Overland Trail. Equestrian trails from Charlotte to Cherry Creek. Chautauqua Rails to Trails is a non-profit organization that develops and maintains recreational trails for personal use on or near abandoned railways. The trails are used for hiking, bicycling, running, treasure hunting, horseback riding, snowmobiling, cross country skiing, and snowshoeing.

### Lakes and Waterways

According to information provided by the Chautauqua County Visitor's Bureau, the county has five lakes and numerous waterways. The northwestern border of Chautauqua County is made up of nearly 50 miles of shoreline along Lake Erie. Chautauqua Lake is a naturally formed lake that is 17 miles long and up to two miles wide. Cassadaga Lake is made up of three inter-connecting glacial lakes. Smaller man-made lakes include Findley Lake and Bear Lake. All of the lakes are popular recreational spots for fishing, swimming, boating, jet skiing, canoeing and kayaking.

The Marden E. Cobb Waterway Trail consists of two 25-mile flat-water trails used for canoeing and kayaking. The Cassadaga Creek (South Stockton to Falconer) and the Conewango Creek (north Kennedy to Kiantone) comprise the waterway trail.

### Horse and Buggy

New York State contains the fifth largest Amish population in the U.S., with the three major settlements located in Clymer and Mayville in Chautauqua County, and Conewango Valley in the adjacent County of Cattaraugus. Horse-driven buggies are required to have kerosene fired or battery-operated lanterns when used after dark according to Amish sect laws. Horse and buggy remains a popular mode of transport for the Amish, which is a safety concern because they share the roadways with other vehicles. As there are no official statistics available for accidents involving horse and buggies and other vehicles, it is difficult to know how many such accidents take place. The horse and buggy does not have a windshield, but according to the NYS DMV Drivers Manual, a "slow-moving vehicle" symbol (a reflective orange triangle) should be displayed on the back of the buggy.

## **TRENDS AND DIRECTIONS**

Ride sharing services are available in Chautauqua County in the form of Uber and Lyft but driver availability is limited, especially in the more rural areas. Apps on a smart phone can be used to order private rides on demand. All scheduling and payments are handled through the app.

Charge NY is New York State's initiative to accelerate the transition to electric vehicles (EVs) and develop the necessary charging infrastructure to support this shift. In 2025, \$21 million in federal funding has been made available for the installation of EV fast chargers along major travel corridors in upstate New York. According to [plugin.com](https://www.plugin.com), there are 123 electric vehicle charging stations in Jamestown, Dunkirk, and Fredonia.

Another NYS initiative is the Charge Ready NY 2.0 program which offers rebates to public, private and not-for-profit organizations that install Level 2 EV charging stations at workplaces, multi-unit dwellings (multifamily properties) or hotels & motels. Rebate amounts include \$3,000 per charging port at workplaces, multifamily and hotel properties. Charging stations for parking spaces assigned to an individual driver will be eligible for \$1,000 per port.

Corporate initiatives include National Grid's EV Charge Smart Plan. The plan provides financial savings to National Grid customers to charge their EV easily and smartly at home through a smartphone app during off-peak hours, 11:00 pm to 7:00 am daily. The plan gives customers the ability to earn a \$15 monthly incentive applied to their monthly National Grid bill.

Several Chautauqua County school districts are actively working towards incorporating electric school buses into their fleets, with some already in operation. However, despite New York State mandates that all new school bus purchases be zero-emission (electric) starting in 2027, and that the entire school bus fleet be zero-emission by 2035, many school districts have been reluctant to meet the zero-emission requirement - citing challenges with costs, electrical capacity, driver shortages, difficult terrain and weather-related issues.

Many local municipalities have adopted Complete Streets policies. According to the Jamestown Post Journal, the Complete Streets policy adopted by Chautauqua County recommended that all modes of travel be considered in the design of the project. Projects should include the feasibility of installing sidewalks, paving shoulders, lane striping, bicycle lanes, "share the road" signs, crosswalks, road configurations, traffic calmers and other similar initiatives. In 2023, the Dunkirk-Fredonia Central Connection outreach project was formed to identify opportunities for design interventions along the 3-mile corridor of Central Avenue between the Village of Fredonia and the City of Dunkirk. To date in 2025, designated bicycle lanes have been implemented to help with the safety of bicyclists.

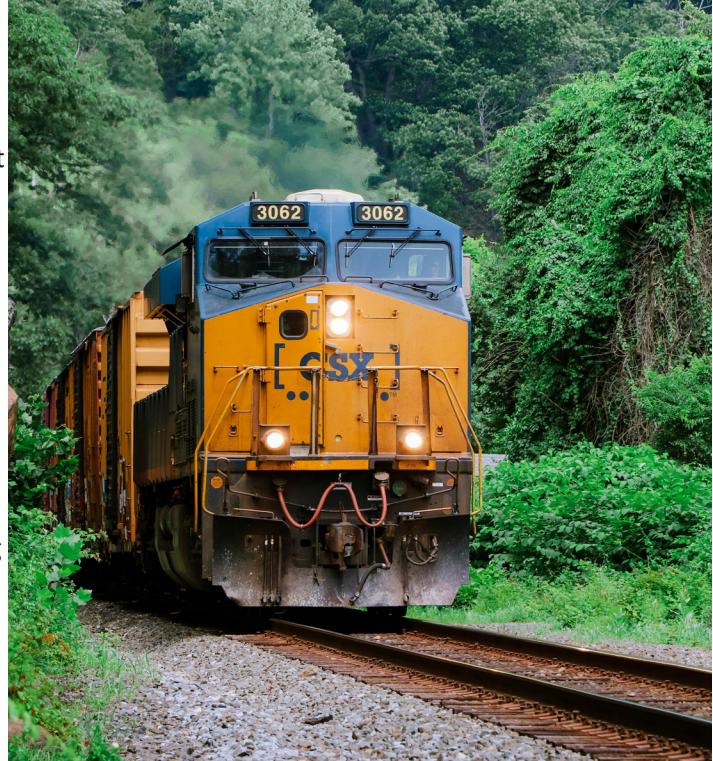
The Complete Streets initiative involves redesigning Vineyard Drive and Millard Fillmore Drive in the City of Dunkirk with a focus on safety and mobility. Design improvements include enhanced pedestrian crossings, bicycle lanes, traffic calming measures, and transit-friendly features. The goal is to create a street environment that supports all users and modes of transportation.

There is one 2-lane roundabout in Chautauqua County at the intersection of NYS Routes 20 and 60 in the Village of Fredonia which was completed in 2020. DOT research and studies consistently support the effectiveness of roundabouts in improving safety and facilitating traffic flow at intersections.

## COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS

Access to transportation continues to be an issue in Chautauqua County. Lack of a reliable transportation method limits the ability of residents to access medical care, shop for groceries, maintain employment, and access childcare. The community would benefit from an expanded public transportation system that is affordable and covers all rural areas of the county. The high cost of owning and maintaining a vehicle and other challenges have affected how residents travel.

In COI's 2025 survey (Appendix I), 74.3% of responders said they use a personal vehicle as their primary method of transportation. Others (9.6%) rely on rides from friends



or family members. Additional responses were walking (6.4%), public transportation (4.13%), ride sharing (2.7%), taxi service (1.4%), and bicycle (1.4%). For parents who have had trouble finding adequate childcare, 16.8% said that a lack of transportation was one of their main barriers to accessing care. 58.8% of responders said that transportation is one of the most common barriers to obtaining or maintaining employment in the county, second only to access to childcare.

## STRENGTHS

- Chautauqua County is well serviced by interstate highway and freight access.
- Electric vehicles are becoming more popular, and charging stations are available in the county.
- The Chautauqua County Transportation Coalition is made up of representatives from various transportation providers and human service agencies in Chautauqua County. The goal is to provide and improve transportation services to seniors, the disabled, and low-income families/individuals.
- Numerous government and corporate incentives are available to promote electric vehicle infrastructure such as EV charging stations.

## CHALLENGES

- Limited public transportation makes it difficult for some people to get to work.
- Weather conditions in Western NY often present challenging driving conditions and delays in the winter months.
- Neither of the county's two airports are currently used for commercial flights.
- There are no Amtrak stops in the county.
- The increased use of e-bikes has increased the risks of injury to riders, pedestrians, and motorists due to their speed, lack of required safety gear, and a lack of obedience to or knowledge of traffic laws and regulations.

## NEEDS / RECOMMENDATIONS

- The community needs a high quality, extended-hour public transportation system.
- Support the efforts of the Chautauqua County Transportation Coalition to develop a plan for transportation access for all residents, particularly the most vulnerable populations.
- Support efforts to bring an Amtrak stop back to Chautauqua County.
- Support the restoration of bus service from Chautauqua County (Dunkirk and Jamestown) to Buffalo and Erie, PA.
- Support the implementation of E-bike regulations on a county wide level to promote the safety of riders, pedestrians and motorists.

# 7. Technology

## INTRODUCTION

Each year, new technologies emerge that significantly reshape how we live, work, and interact with one another. From virtual classrooms and telemedicine to remote work and online shopping, digital tools have become integral to everyday life. This shift became especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when social distancing forced much of the world to rely on technology for communication, education, healthcare, and employment. While these innovations helped many stay connected and informed during a time of isolation, they also underscored the digital divide. Populations without reliable internet access, up-to-date devices, or digital literacy were left at a considerable disadvantage. The pandemic revealed that access to technology is no longer a luxury but a necessity—and those without it face growing inequities in nearly every aspect of life.

## DEMOGRAPHICS AND STATISTICS

Computer and internet use is prevalent in the everyday lives of most Americans. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2023 ACS, 94.0% of households in NYS own a computer and 89.6% have a broadband internet subscription. The census reports slightly lower figures for Chautauqua County, as 90% of the population reported owning a computer and 85.8% reported having a broadband internet subscription. In COI's 2025 Community Needs Survey (Appendix I), 89.9% of respondents reported having at least one computer, laptop or tablet in their home, and 95.9% said they have access to the internet. County residents who do not own a computer can access them at most of the community libraries, but limited public transportation can make access difficult.

A significant number of households in Chautauqua County, particularly in rural areas, may experience slower internet speeds or lack access to high-speed options. Urban areas generally have better access to high-speed internet options compared to rural areas. The availability of specific providers such as Spectrum, Kinetic, or satellite providers varies across the county.

*High-Speed Internet:* According to ISP Reports, T-Mobile Home Internet is available to 95.3% of the county with speeds up to 100 Mbps. Spectrum, a major cable provider, also offers high-speed internet to a large portion of the county.

*Fiber:* While some providers such as Kinetic by Windstream offer fiber internet, it is not universally available throughout the county.

*DSL (Digital Subscriber Line):* DSL is a more widely available option, but speeds are typically lower than fiber or cable.

*Satellite Internet:* For rural locations, satellite internet providers such as Viasat offer options, but these may come with data caps and potential latency issues.

### Factors Influencing availability and speed:



According to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), the Emergency Broadband Connectivity fund was established in December 2020 to help families access broadband internet. This program was created in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the realization that lack of internet access was a significant barrier for many individuals and families. This program gave qualifying families a \$50 discount on their internet service each month. On December 31, 2021, the program was replaced with the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), which provides a \$30 discount on internet service each month. For both programs, those living on Tribal lands receive a \$75 per month discount. The ACP ended on June 1, 2024 because Congress did not provide additional funding.

COI's 2025 survey found that 84.4% of those responding use a smart phone, while 11.4% use a cell phone that's not

a smart phone. Another 4.1% said they use a landline as their primary phone. While most consumer electronics such as smart phones and computers tend to be expensive, options exist for low-income residents in Chautauqua County to integrate themselves technologically. The Lifeline Assistance Program, a federal program administered by the FCC, offers discounts on monthly phone and internet services for eligible low-income households. It has provided people with low or no-cost phone services since 1985. In New York State, residents who participate in public assistance programs such as Medicaid and SNAP are eligible to receive a free smartphone as well. Various companies occasionally set up tents outside of grocery stores offering these services to families who can benefit. Those who qualify can also apply online at <https://www.lifelinesupport.org/>.

## TRENDS AND DIRECTIONS

Although Chautauqua County lags behind the nation somewhat in the use of technology, it has the potential to catch up as technological advances permeate just about every aspect of our lives. Some of the many ways in which technology is transforming our day-to-day activities include:



- Colleges and universities offer distance learning programs that allow people to avoid transportation problems and, in some cases, to work at their own pace.
- Health services can be delivered through telemedicine, allowing health professionals to diagnose and monitor patients remotely, addressing mobility and access problems.
- Online shopping has significantly increased in recent years, offering consumers greater convenience and a wider selection of products. However, this shift has often come at the expense of traditional brick-and-mortar retailers, many of which struggle to compete with the pricing, speed, and accessibility of e-commerce platforms.
- Satellite-based Global Positioning Devices (GPS) have transformed navigation for all types of transportation worldwide.
- Streaming media allows a user to start playing digital video or audio content before the entire file has been transmitted. Streaming services such as YouTube, Netflix, and Hulu are changing the way many people watch television shows and films.
- Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter make it easy for individuals, businesses and other entities to interconnect and communicate.

While the value of having access to communication and information at our fingertips cannot be understated, the widespread use of technological devices also makes us susceptible to online dangers. Technology scams targeting children and seniors include AI-driven imposter scams, and tech support scams that request remote access or payment for non-existent issues. Children learn to use technology at an early age and computers with internet access have become educational staples in our schools. According to a research study conducted by Boston Children's Hospital Digital Wellness Lab, the average age that parents report getting their children a cellphone is 10 years old.

Technology has made our lives easier and allowed for advanced ways to connect with each other on a global scale. According to 2024 data from Statista.com. 99% of U.S. adults aged 18-49 and 98% of adults aged 50-64 use the internet, as well as 90% of those 65 and older. Similar data from the Pew Research Center reports that nine in ten U.S. adults (90%) reported going online daily, with 41% saying they use the internet almost constantly.

Smartphone usage has also become an ever-present element of daily life for many in the country. According to the Pew Research Center, 85.0% of the U.S. population owns a smartphone. Since the first iPhone was introduced only in 2007, this shift in technology has been particularly massive. Most people carry a device that can connect to the internet with them wherever they go, transforming the way we interact with it and with each other.

5G is the latest generation of wireless technology, offering faster internet speeds, improved reliability, and the ability to connect more devices at once. Launched in 2019, it delivers download speeds up to 10 gigabits per second and is designed to support modern digital needs like streaming, remote work, and smart devices. Low-band 5G provides broad coverage and strong signal strength, even indoors, and now reaches over 90% of the U.S. population. Because of its speed and bandwidth, 5G is also being used as an alternative to traditional home internet.

Higher bandwidth and can therefore connect a larger number of different devices, improving the quality of internet services in crowded areas. Due to the increased bandwidth, it is expected the networks will increasingly be used as general internet service providers (ISPs) for laptops and desktop computers. 5G coverage in Chautauqua County is minimal as of 2022, but is expected to expand by 2025.

Chautauqua County has strong 5G coverage across major providers. Verizon covers about 99% of the county, AT&T covers 98%, and T-Mobile covers 93%. This widespread access helps ensure local residents and businesses can benefit from reliable, high-speed connectivity.

Advances in Artificial Intelligence (AI) have led to a wide range of practical applications, including translation services, healthcare operations, and environmental monitoring, to name just a few. Corporations now use AI-powered chatbots to respond to customer inquiries efficiently, while individuals benefit from AI tools that assist with writing, editing, and generating content. Communities can use AI to address critical needs like improving public services, enhancing healthcare, and promoting economic development.

AI can be used to improve public health outcomes, especially for under-served populations. Telemedicine and advanced diagnostic technologies that use AI can help overcome provider shortages in rural or marginalized areas. AI can rapidly analyze vast amounts of biomedical and genetic data, speeding up the discovery of new diagnostic tools and treatments for disease.



## STRENGTHS

- Technology has transformed communication by making it easier than ever to communicate with each other.
- The internet, navigation devices, telemedicine, and streaming media are changing the ways we interact with the world, making us better informed and making our lives easier.
- AI and other emerging technologies have significantly boosted performance across countless industries.

## CHALLENGES

- Rural areas remain that lack adequate internet access and/or cell phone reception, limiting communication for residents in remote areas.
- Many people are not aware of best practices for cybersecurity or do not make an effort to follow them.
- Children and teens are particularly vulnerable to cyber bullying and online predators, underscoring the need for parental supervision and controls.
- Seniors are susceptible to imposter scams that use AI to pose as a trusted relative asking for money. Pop-up warnings try to trick victims into downloading malware or giving up financial information.
- Small brick and mortar retailers must find ways to compete with online shopping retailers and mega-

stores.

- Communities may mistrust new technologies, making education a critical component for building acceptance of initiatives that use technological advances.

## NEEDS / RECOMMENDATIONS

- Rural communities need support for infrastructure investments to expand internet access and quality.
- Families need education that provides an understanding of cybersecurity risks, best practices, and the need to monitor children's online activity and cell phone use and educate them about potential dangers.
- Seniors need education about methods used by scammers to obtain financial information or money.



# 8. Volunteerism

## INTRODUCTION

Many organizations depend on volunteers to provide necessary services in their community while helping to save on costs. A report by the Urban Institute found that, in addition to these benefits, volunteers may possess specialized skills that are a tremendous asset to their agency and the people they serve. The report also found that volunteers can increase public support for an organization's programs, improve community relations, and increase the quality of services.

Volunteerism can strengthen a company's workforce by helping to instill company values in employees, attracting and retaining workers, generating team building between employees, and improving the company's image. Many workers are motivated by the opportunity to give back, so giving them opportunities to volunteer makes a positive impact for the organization as a whole.

Along those lines, volunteerism has a noticeable effect on our individual attitudes. Plenty of evidence exists suggesting that volunteerism increases our happiness, which can in turn promote productivity in the workplace and other positive net effects. Volunteerism can also provide opportunities for professional development, since it can help to reinforce problem-solving, leadership, and teamwork skills.

Other positive results may include giving your organization the ability to do more work, reducing the burden on paid staff, giving your organization a larger and more diverse membership, allowing for persons outside your organization to better understand your work, and maximizing what you can accomplish within your budget.

### The Benefits of Volunteering for Individuals

Volunteers may be devoting their time toward helping others, but their service has the potential to be rewarding for themselves. Among other benefits, volunteers often meet new people and gain connections. They acquire a better understanding of their community's needs, obtain an understanding of local service organizations, become more invested in their community, and gain new experiences for future employment. Volunteers set a positive example for others in their lives. Youth volunteers have opportunities to learn the value of community service, gain experience in specific fields, and develop civic engagement skills.

Baby Boomers, individuals born between 1946 and 1964, are a large group of people who have either already retired or are entering retirement age. This provides an opportunity for a large number of potential volunteers. There have been numerous studies demonstrating that seniors who participate in volunteer activities to keep them active and engaged remain in better health. For example, the Urban Institute conducted a study of seniors volunteering at a public elementary school. They found that the volunteers outscored seniors who were not volunteering in both physical strength and cognitive ability. Other studies found that seniors who volunteer tend to live longer and have better physical and mental health than seniors who are not physically and cognitively engaged.



## CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

Chautauqua County has many opportunities for those looking to volunteer their time for an organization or a cause. The following list is organized by cause and is not exhaustive. Phone numbers and web addresses are accurate as of 2025. However, it is possible that a phone number or address may change after this date. All area codes are (716) unless noted otherwise.

Animals			
Organization	Location	Phone	Web Address
Chautauqua County Humane Society	Jamestown	665-2209	<a href="http://www.chqhumane.org">www.chqhumane.org</a>
Lakeshore Humane Society	Dunkirk	672-1991	<a href="http://www.lakeshorehumanesociety.org">www.lakeshorehumanesociety.org</a>
Northern Chautauqua Canine Rescue	Westfield	326-7297	<a href="http://www.caninerescue.org">www.caninerescue.org</a>
Westfield Stray Cat Rescue	Westfield	326-2404	<a href="http://www.facebook.com/westfieldstraycatrescue">www.facebook.com/westfieldstraycatrescue</a>
Dunkirk Pet Pantry	Dunkirk	785-5183	<a href="http://www.facebook.com/groups/344909272374/">www.facebook.com/groups/344909272374/</a>
Audubon Community Nature Center	Jamestown	569-2345	<a href="http://www.auduboncnc.org">www.auduboncnc.org</a>
Arts			
1891 Fredonia Opera House	Fredonia	679-1891	<a href="http://www.fredopera.org">www.fredopera.org</a>
Infinity Performing Arts Center	Jamestown	664-0991	<a href="http://www.infinityperformingarts.org">www.infinityperformingarts.org</a>
Lucille Ball Little Theater	Jamestown	483-1095	<a href="http://www.lbltj.com">www.lbltj.com</a>
The National Comedy Center	Jamestown	484-2222 ext. 100	<a href="http://www.comedycenter.org/getinvolved/">www.comedycenter.org/getinvolved/</a>
Children and Youth			
Boys & Girls Clubs	Dunkirk	366-1061	<a href="http://www.bgcofncc.org">www.bgcofncc.org</a>
Boy Scouts of America	Falconer	665-2697	<a href="http://www.alleghenyhighlands.org">www.alleghenyhighlands.org</a>
Campus & Community Children's Center	Fredonia	673-4662	<a href="http://www.fredonia.edu/about/offices/campus-and-community-childrens-center">www.fredonia.edu/about/offices/campus-and-community-childrens-center</a>
Centaur Stride	Westfield	326-4318	<a href="http://www.centaurstride.org">www.centaurstride.org</a>
Chautauqua Striders	Chautauqua County	488-2203	<a href="http://www.chqstriders.org/get-involved/">www.chqstriders.org/get-involved/</a>
Chautauqua Opportunities, Inc.	Dunkirk/ Jamestown	366-3333 x1225	<a href="http://www.chautauquaopportunities.com/volunteer/">www.chautauquaopportunities.com/volunteer/</a>
Girl Scouts of WNY	Jamestown	935-6040	<a href="http://www.gswny.org">www.gswny.org</a>
Community			
American Red Cross	Dunkirk	366-4033	<a href="http://www.redcross.org/local/new-york/western-new-york.html">www.redcross.org/local/new-york/western-new-york.html</a>
	Jamestown	800-733-2767	
Chautauqua Area Habitat for Humanity	Mayville	269-7772	<a href="http://www.chqhabitat.org/">www.chqhabitat.org/</a>
Chautauqua County Rural Ministry	Dunkirk	366-1787	<a href="http://www.theccrm.org">www.theccrm.org</a>
Chautauqua Safety Village	Ashville	338-0171	<a href="http://www.chautauquasafetyvillage.com">www.chautauquasafetyvillage.com</a>

## Community (con't)

Chautauqua Opportunities, Inc	Dunkirk/ Jamestown	366-3333 x1225	<a href="http://www.chautauquaopportunities.com/volunteer">www.chautauquaopportunities.com/volunteer</a>
Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy	Jamestown	664-2166	<a href="http://www.chautauquawatershed.org">www.chautauquawatershed.org</a>
Community Blood Bank of NWPA and WNY		1-877-842- 0631	<a href="http://www.fourhearts.org/support-us/">www.fourhearts.org/support-us/</a>
Community Helping Hands	Jamestown	487-1488	<a href="http://www.chhny.org">www.chhny.org</a>
Compeer Chautauqua	Dunkirk	366-3161	<a href="http://www.chqcompeer.com/">www.chqcompeer.com/</a>
Cornell Cooperative Extension	Jamestown	664-9502	<a href="http://www.cce.cornell.edu">www.cce.cornell.edu</a>
Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA)	Chautauqua County	753-4123 753-4447	<a href="http://www.chautauquacasa.com">www.chautauquacasa.com</a>
Dunkirk Free Library	Dunkirk	366-2511	<a href="http://www.dunkirklibrary.org">www.dunkirklibrary.org</a>
Meals on Wheels	Dunkirk/ Fredonia	366-8822	<a href="http://www.dfmealsonwheels.org/">www.dfmealsonwheels.org/</a>
	Jamestown	488-9119	<a href="http://www.jmstmow.com">www.jmstmow.com</a>
Housing Options Made Equal	Buffalo	854-1400	<a href="http://www.homeny.org/">www.homeny.org/</a>
James Prendergast Library	Jamestown	484-7135	<a href="http://www.prendergastlibrary.org">www.prendergastlibrary.org</a>
Jamestown Renaissance Corporation	Jamestown	708-6761	<a href="http://www.jamestownrenaissance.org">www.jamestownrenaissance.org</a>
Learning Disabilities Association of WNY	Fredonia	679-1601	<a href="http://www.ldanys.org/">www.ldanys.org/</a>
Literacy Volunteers of Chautauqua County	Dunkirk	366-4438	<a href="http://www.lvccread.org">www.lvccread.org</a>
	Jamestown	484-7135	
Patterson Library	Westfield	326-2154	<a href="http://www.pattersonlibrary.info">www.pattersonlibrary.info</a>
Recovery Options Made Easy	Jamestown	661-3845	<a href="http://www.recoveryoptionsny.org/">www.recoveryoptionsny.org/</a>
The Resource Center	Jamestown	483-2344	<a href="http://www.resourcecenter.org/join-us/volunteer-at-trc/">www.resourcecenter.org/join-us/volunteer-at-trc/</a>
Robert H. Jackson Center	Jamestown	483-6646	<a href="http://www.roberthjackson.org">www.roberthjackson.org</a>
Salvation Army	Dunkirk	366-3701	<a href="http://www.easternusa.salvationarmy.org/empire/dunkirk/">www.easternusa.salvationarmy.org/empire/dunkirk/</a>
	Jamestown	664-4108	<a href="http://www.easternusa.salvationarmy.org/empire/jamestown/">www.easternusa.salvationarmy.org/empire/jamestown/</a>
Southern Tier Environments for Living	Dunkirk	366-3200	<a href="http://www.stel.org">www.stel.org</a>
	Jamestown	664-4108	
St. Susan Center	Jamestown	664-2253	<a href="http://www.stsusancenter.org/volunteers">www.stsusancenter.org/volunteers</a>
Veterans Administration Clinic	Dunkirk	203-6474	<a href="http://www.va.gov/western-new-york-health-care/work-with-us/volunteer-or-donate/">www.va.gov/western-new-york-health-care/work-with-us/volunteer-or-donate/</a>
	Dunkirk Mental Health	862-3117	
	Jamestown Mental Health	862-3117	
	Jamestown	338-1511	

Community (con't.)			
Volunteer Income Tax Assistance	Dunkirk	366-6597	<a href="http://www.uwayscc.org/vita">www.uwayscc.org/vita</a>
	Jamestown	483-1561	
YWCA of Westfield	Westfield	326-2011	<a href="http://www.ywcawestfield.org">www.ywcawestfield.org</a>
YWCA of Jamestown	Jamestown	488-2237x228	<a href="http://www.ywcajamestown.com">www.ywcajamestown.com</a>
Health/Wellness			
Brooks Memorial Hospital/TLC Hospital System	Dunkirk	366-1111	<a href="http://www.brookshospital.org">www.brookshospital.org</a>
CBA Vision Rehabilitation Services (formerly Chautauqua Blind Association)	Jamestown	664-6660	<a href="http://www.cbavision.org/get-involved/">www.cbavision.org/get-involved/</a>
Prevention Works	Dunkirk	366-4623	<a href="http://www.preventionworks.us/">www.preventionworks.us/</a>
	Jamestown	664-3608	
Chautauqua County Hospice & Palliative Care	Chautauqua County	388-0033	<a href="http://www.chpc.care/careers/">www.chpc.care/careers/</a>
UPMC Chautauqua Hospital	Jamestown	487-0141	<a href="http://www.upmc.com/about/support/giving/volunteer/locations/northwest-pa-ny">www.upmc.com/about/support/giving/volunteer/locations/northwest-pa-ny</a>
Westfield Memorial Hospital/Allegheny Health Network	Westfield	326-4921	<a href="http://www.ahn.org/locations/hospitals/westfield-memorial">www.ahn.org/locations/hospitals/westfield-memorial</a>
History			
Dunkirk Historical Society and Museum	Dunkirk	366-3797	<a href="http://www.dunkirkhistoricalmuseum.org">www.dunkirkhistoricalmuseum.org</a>
Fenton History Center	Jamestown	664-6526	<a href="http://www.fentonhistorycenter.org">www.fentonhistorycenter.org</a>
Sports and Recreation			
Allegany State Park	Salamanca	354-9121	<a href="http://www.friendsofallegany.com">www.friendsofallegany.com</a>
Camp Gross	Cassadaga	595-2171	<a href="http://www.campgross.org">www.campgross.org</a>
Chautauqua County Fair Association	Dunkirk	366-4752	<a href="http://www.chautauquacofair.org">www.chautauquacofair.org</a>
Chautauqua Rails to Trails	Mayville	753-2800 Ask for Bill Ward	<a href="http://www.chaurtt.org">www.chaurtt.org</a>
Chautauqua County Sports Hall of Fame	Jamestown	640-6219	<a href="http://www.chautauquasportshalloffame.org/getinvolved.php#volunteer">www.chautauquasportshalloffame.org/getinvolved.php#volunteer</a>
Jamestown Audubon Society	Jamestown	569-2345	<a href="http://www.auduboncnc.org">www.auduboncnc.org</a>
NYS Department of Environmental Conservation	Chautauqua County	372-0645	<a href="http://www.dec.ny.gov/about/employment/volunteers">www.dec.ny.gov/about/employment/volunteers</a>
Seniors			
Chautauqua Adult Day Care	Jamestown	665-4899	<a href="http://www.seniordayprograms.com/">www.seniordayprograms.com/</a>
	Dunkirk	366-8786 x4	
Chautauqua County RSVP	Jamestown	665-3038	<a href="http://www.lutheran-jamestown.org/rsvp-retired-senior-volunteer-program">www.lutheran-jamestown.org/rsvp-retired-senior-volunteer-program</a>
	Dunkirk	366-8070	<a href="http://www.211wny.org/provider/1187/">www.211wny.org/provider/1187/</a>
Chautauqua Opportunities, Inc.	Dunkirk	366-3333 x 1225	<a href="http://www.chautauquaopportunities.com/volunteer">www.chautauquaopportunities.com/volunteer</a>

## VOLUNTEERISM

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NYS Office of the Aging Long Term Care Ombudsman Program (LTCOP)	Chautauqua County	817-9222 Mary Shaw, Volunteer Coordinator	<a href="http://www.aging.ny.gov/ombudsman">www.aging.ny.gov/ombudsman</a>
			<a href="http://www.aging.ny.gov/form/ltcp.volunteer-form">www.aging.ny.gov/form/ltcp.volunteer-form</a>
Heritage Ministries Rehab/Retirement/ Senior Living	Gerry	487-6800	<a href="http://www.heritage1886.org">www.heritage1886.org</a>

# Addendum: Head Start

## INTRODUCTION

Head Start is a federally funded early childhood education program created in 1965 as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty. Its purpose is to promote school readiness for young children from low-income families by providing comprehensive services that support early learning, health, nutrition, and family well-being. The program recognizes that a child's development is strongly influenced by their family and community environment, and therefore it works not only with children but also with parents and caregivers to ensure long-term success.

The original Head Start initiative began as a summer pilot program to help children from disadvantaged backgrounds prepare for kindergarten. Over time, Head Start evolved into a year-round program offering center-based and home-based services for children ages three to five. In addition to education, the program addresses physical and mental health, dental care, and social-emotional development, making it one of the first early childhood programs to take a holistic approach to child well-being.

In 1995, the federal government launched Early Head Start (EHS) to serve pregnant women, infants, and toddlers up to age three. This expansion was grounded in research highlighting the critical importance of the first three years of life for brain development and long-term outcomes. Early Head Start focuses on nurturing relationships and providing a safe, stimulating environment for very young children. It also supports parents in their role as primary caregivers and promotes healthy prenatal and postnatal development.

COI was one of the first providers in the country for both Head Start and Early Head Start. In 2015, through the federal Early Head Start–Child Care Partnership initiative, COI expanded its capacity via collaboration with the Lake Shore Family Center that continues to this day. COI's current federal grant provides services for 169 Head Start children and 134 Early Head Start children in the geographic area of Chautauqua County.

To support quality programming, COI also fully participates in New York State's QualityStars program – a rating and technical assistance program for licensed and registered child care providers. Each of its centers has received a rating of 4 out of 5 stars.

## DEMOGRAPHICS AND STATISTICS

The following table uses data from the U.S. Census Bureau 2023 American Community Survey to illustrate the number of children in Chautauqua County who are eligible for Head Start and Early Head Start services.

Total Population	126,329
Children under 5 years of age	6,686
Under 5 and living in poverty (Head Start eligible)	1,975
<b>Estimated under 5 and living in poverty by race/ethnicity</b>	
White	1,772
Black or African American	39
American Indian	7
Asian	12
Native Hawaiian	1
Some other race	59
Two or more races	85
Hispanic or Latino	154
White, non-Hispanic or Latino	1,663

Source: [www.data.census.gov](http://www.data.census.gov)



English is the predominant language spoken in Chautauqua County. However, there is a significant Hispanic population in which Spanish is the native language. According to the 2023 ACS, 9.0% of the population primarily speaks a language other than English, which is Spanish for 5.4% of residents. In the past three years, COI's Head Start has also provided services to one family whose native language was Bangladeshi and one family whose native language was Chinese.

Head Start's purpose is to provide at-risk children with a head start on their education. Children experiencing homelessness and children in foster care are two of the most at-risk sub-sets of children, and these situations automatically qualify the children for Head Start services. According to [nyteach.org](https://nyteach.org), Chautauqua County schools recorded a total of 20 homeless children at the pre-K grade level for the 2023-2024 school year. The Chautauqua County Department of Health and Human Services 2022 Annual Report lists 89 children age 17 and under in foster care as of the end of 2022.

COI is currently funded to serve 303 children with Head Start/Early Head Start services, which is only 15.3% of the estimated need in Chautauqua

County. Head Start regulations mandate that "a program must ensure at least 10 percent of its total actual enrollment is filled by children eligible for services under IDEA." In the last program year, 20% of children served met this criteria, and in the past three years it has not been below 15%. Disabilities include physical, speech and language delays, and developmental delays. According to the 2023 ACS, 6.4% of children in Chautauqua County (428 children under 5) have some type of disability.

Head Start programs can also provide services to pregnant women. According to the NYS Department of Health, Chautauqua County had 1,157 live births in 2022. Using poverty data, it can be estimated that 212 of the births were to women in poverty. Chautauqua county has a robust pregnancy support program for low-income mothers and COI's internal data show that a majority of pregnant women served over the past 5 years were already enrolled in the home-based portion of the program with an older sibling, meaning these parents still would have received services through the comprehensive HS family model. Given the available supports within the County for low-income pregnant women and the unmet need for child care, COI's management team and Policy Council have chosen to direct all Head Start funds to child based services.

#### Other Early Education Programming

All 18 school districts in Chautauqua County offer pre-k programming for 4-year-olds. Only four school districts offer pre-k programming for 3-year-olds. COI partners with three of the districts to integrate Head Start and pre-k, and provides 43% of the school funded, 3-year-old pre-k services in the county. COI also partners with the two largest school districts to provide 100 children with combined 4-year-old pre-k and Head Start services. The table below details the numbers of children served by each district, according to information from the NYS Education Department UPK Allocations for 2025-2026.

Section 3602-e of Education Law requires that school districts must establish a process to select eligible children to receive UPK services on a random basis when there are more eligible children than can be served in a given school year. This means that Head Start remains an important

School District	3-year-old pre-K slots	4-year-old pre-K slots
Bemus Point	0	45
Brocton	14	36
Cassadaga Valley	0	60
Chautauqua Lake	0	20
Clymer	0	36
Dunkirk	112	138
Falconer	0	59
Forestville	0	24
Fredonia	0	74
Frewsburg	0	37
Jamestown	96	316
Panama	0	16
Pine Valley	0	17
Ripley	14	14
Sherman	0	24
Silver Creek	0	26
Southwestern	0	67
Westfield	0	27
<b>Totals</b>	<b>236</b>	<b>1,036</b>

resource for low-income families, as neither the 3- year-old nor the 4-year-old slots meets universal need – estimated at 1,337 children in each age group.

The Child Care chapter of this Community Needs Assessment details the availability of licensed and registered day care in the county. The capacity of the day care centers is 1,590 children (including 130 school aged children). COI's Head Start program supports 33% of the county's day care center capacity. The county has an additional 471 slots of child care available through registered family and group family day cares.

New York State also maintains a Directory of Voluntary Registered Nursery Schools and Kindergartens. There are currently none in Chautauqua County. There are 15 unregulated nursery/pre-schools operated by religious entities or other non-profits offering half-day programs (less than 3 hours).

## TRENDS AND DIRECTIONS

The Office of Head Start (OHS) issued an Information Memorandum ACF-IM-HS-22-06, on September 12 2022, addressing the urgent need to stabilize the Head Start workforce. The memo acknowledged that while staff qualifications and credentials had significantly increased over the past decade, wages and benefits had remained stagnant, resulting in recruitment and retention challenges. OHS emphasized that a well-supported workforce was critical to maintaining high-quality services for children and families. The memorandum encouraged programs to review their organizational structures and consider sustainable strategies—such as consolidating grants, restructuring management, or reducing enrollment slots—to redirect funds toward increased staff compensation and supports without compromising service quality. The memo highlighted several strategies for increasing compensation and financial supports to improve workforce stability. OHS urged programs to permanently raise wages using data from wage comparability studies, particularly in alignment with local school systems, and to offer comprehensive benefits like healthcare and paid leave.

Locally, COI had seen exactly these issues since September 2019 in which certified teachers were leaving for school district positions, and wages for entry level positions (teacher assistants) lagged behind local school districts as well as entry level jobs in other industries, including food service, manufacturing and health care. The hiring issues were compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2019, COI's Head Start grants had the capacity to serve 501 children and their families. Through its Community Needs Assessment in 2023 and a Wage Comparability Study that compared wages of similar positions at partnering school districts, COI (in conjunction with its Head Start Policy Council) determined the best way forward was to raise wages and reduce the number of children served in order to preserve the quality of the programming. COI's Head Start grant application was approved in 2025 and the new service model began on July 1, 2025. While COI's hiring situation has improved in this short time period, as of January 7, 2026, the program still had 10% of its positions unfilled.

To further support workforce development, COI's classroom staff that do not have formal degrees or certificates in early childhood are enrolled in the Child Development Associate (CDA) credential within their first two years of employment. The credential and the training hours are paid for by COI. That CDA credential can then be used at Jamestown Community College as 11 credit hours towards an Associate's Degree in Early Childhood Education, further increasing an employee's knowledge and earning potential.



## STRENGTHS

- COI's Head Start program is the largest day care and pre-k provider in Chautauqua County. Strong partnerships exist with local school districts to maximize resources for provision of pre-k services.

## CHALLENGES

- The combined capacity of UPK programs and day care programs only allows for 50% of children under the age of 5 to be in a regulated day care or educational program.
- The tight labor market continues to place pressure on the program to find and keep qualified employees.

## NEEDS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Expand the geographical reach of Head Start services within Chautauqua County by partnering with local school districts to introduce 3-year-old pre-kindergarten programs to maximize fiscal resources, provide programming in local communities, and allow for the enrollment of children from economically diverse backgrounds.



# Appendix I: Community Needs Survey

## INTRODUCTION

The following data was collected through an online survey that was available from July 7 through September 10, 2025 in English and Spanish. A link to the survey was distributed through COI's website, social media pages, and flyers to solicit information directly from Chautauqua County residents.

## RESULTS

### 1. Does your current household income meet your basic needs?

	Percentage	Number
Yes	55.77%	145
No	44.23%	115

### 2. In general, what do you think are the most common barriers to obtaining or maintaining full-time employment for people in your community? (choose up to 4)

	Percentage	Number
Child care	58.85%	153
Transportation	53.85%	140
Low wages	44.62%	116
Fear of losing public benefits	35.00%	91
Lack of education or specialized skills	27.31%	71
Lack of full-time job opportunities	26.92%	70
Lack of motivation/work ethic	24.62%	64
Inability to pass drug screening	18.46%	48
Lack of experience	16.92%	44
Inability to pass background check	15.00%	39
Language barrier	14.23%	37
Lack of job search/interviewing skills	10.00%	26
Physical limitations/disability	1.15%	3
Mental health	0.77%	2
Not enough employment assistance centers	0.38%	1
Inability to pass a credit check	0.38%	1

### 3. What do you think are the primary challenges for people wanting to establish a business in Chautauqua County? (Check up to 3)

	Percentage	Number
Lack of startup financing	61.15%	159
High taxes/fees	53.46%	139
Poor economic conditions	40.00%	104

Inability to obtain credit/poor credit score	36.15%	94
Lack of business training	25.00%	65
Lack of experience	21.15%	56
Regulatory barriers	20.77%	54
Lack of qualified workforce	14.62%	38

**4. In your opinion, what are the most common barriers to homeownership in Chautauqua County? (Check up to 3)**

	Percentage	Number
High cost of housing	60.49%	147
Inability to save for down payment/closing costs	56.38%	137
High property taxes	49.38%	120
Inability to obtain a mortgage (credit scores)	40.33%	98
Cost of maintaining a home after purchase	25.10%	61
Not enough quality housing for sale	24.28%	59
High interest rates	23.87%	58
Length of time to close on a property	4.94%	12
Lack of knowledge on purchasing a home	0.38%	1

**5. What challenges have you experienced when searching for rental housing in Chautauqua County? (Check up to 3)**

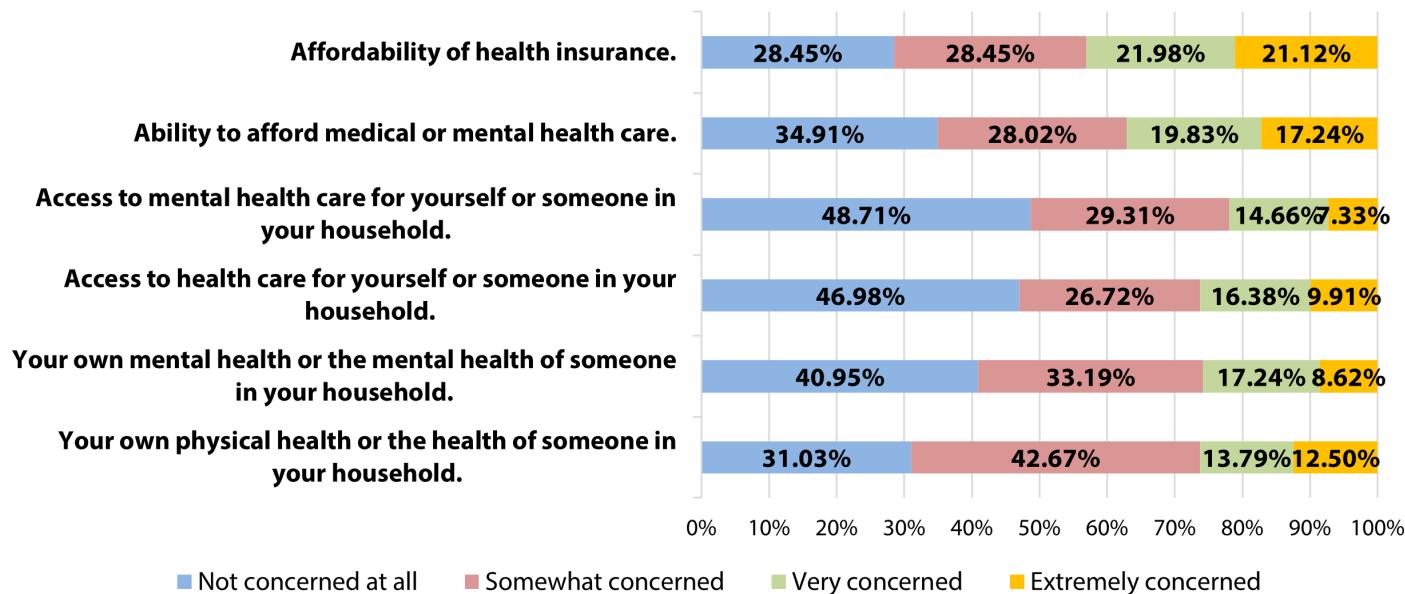
	Percentage	Number
Rents are not affordable	83.75%	134
Quality of housing is not acceptable	80.00%	128
No units available in the location I need	36.25%	58
I believe I experienced discrimination	23.75%	38
Does not accept pets	3.12%	5
Credit checks	0.62%	1
High security deposit/income requirement	0.62%	1
Not applicable/I have not searched for rental housing in Chautauqua County	N/A	83

**6. In your opinion, which of these services should be increased to address homelessness in Chautauqua county? (Check up to 3 that are the most important)**

	Percentage	Number
Mental health services	51.85%	126
Emergency shelters	43.62%	106
Permanent housing	41.15%	100
Substance abuse services	40.74%	99
Outreach to make people aware of available services	37.45%	91
Transitional housing	34.98%	85
Case management	29.63%	72
Work programs	0.41%	1
Rent regulation	0.41%	1

## 7. Please rate your level of concern with the following issues related to health.

## Level of Concern With Health Issues



## 8. In the past 12 months, have you or a member of your household needed but could not get (check all that apply):

	Percentage	Number
Medical care	18.53%	43
Mental health services	18.53%	43
I have been able to get all of these that I needed.	58.19%	135

## 9. Do you see a primary care doctor at least once per year?

	Percentage	Number
Yes	92.24%	214
No	7.76%	18

## 10. Do you see a dentist at least once per year?

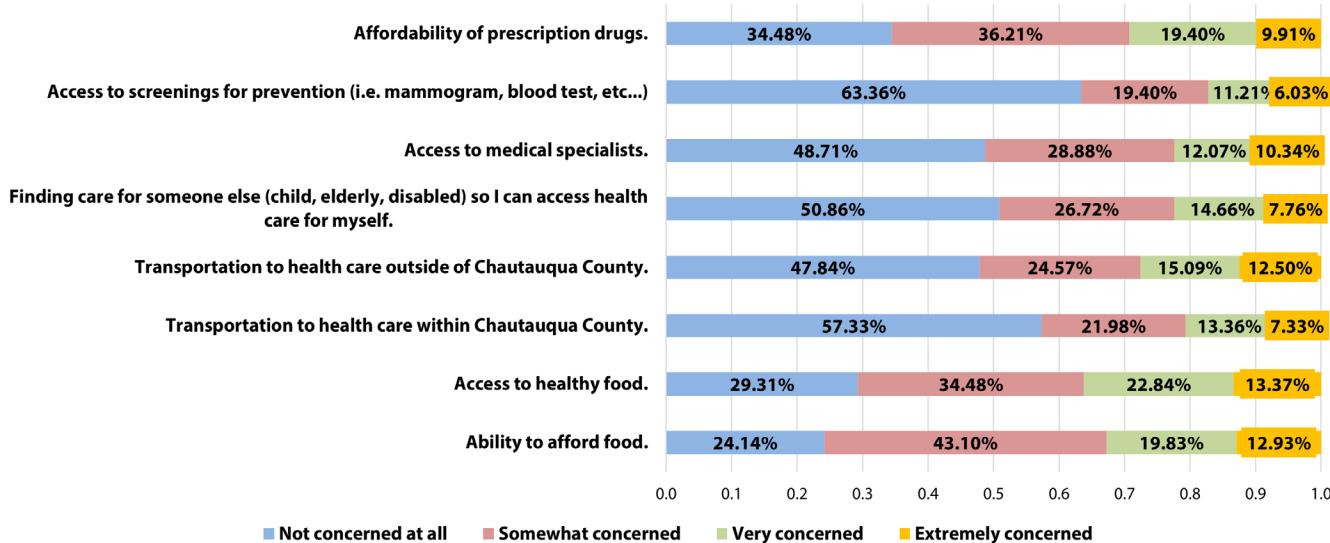
	Percentage	Number
Yes	63.36%	147
No	36.64%	85

## 11. Are you able to access medical specialists when needed?

	Percentage	Number
Yes	81.59%	164
No	18.41%	37
I don't have a need for medical specialists	N/A	31

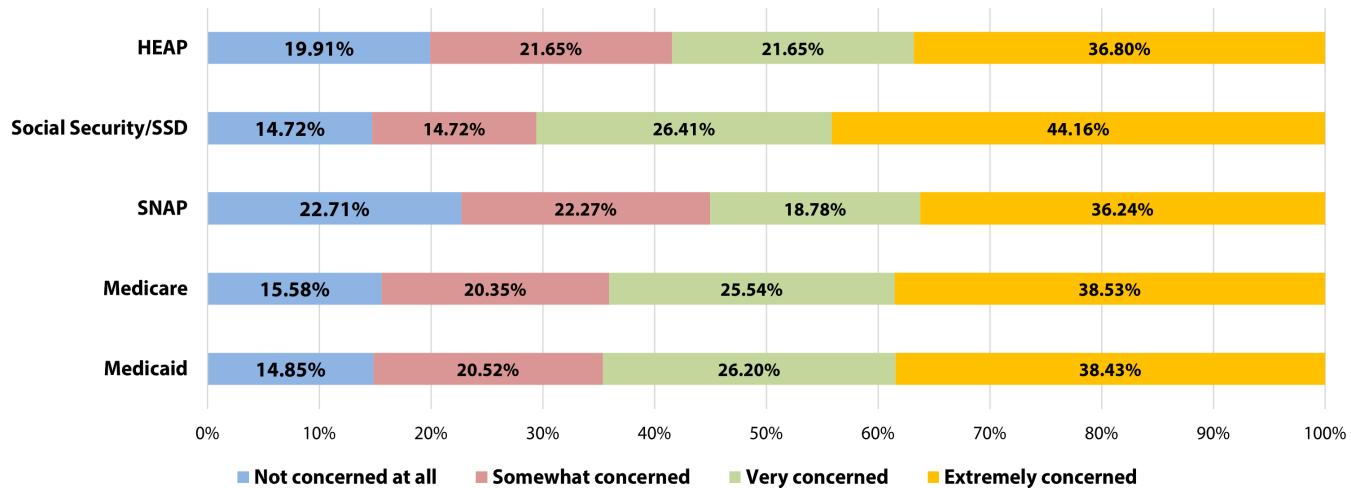
## 12. Please rate your level of concern with the following issues.

## Level of concern with the following issues



## 13. Please rate your level of concern with the effects of federal funding cuts to the following:

## Rate your level of concern with the effects of federal funding cuts

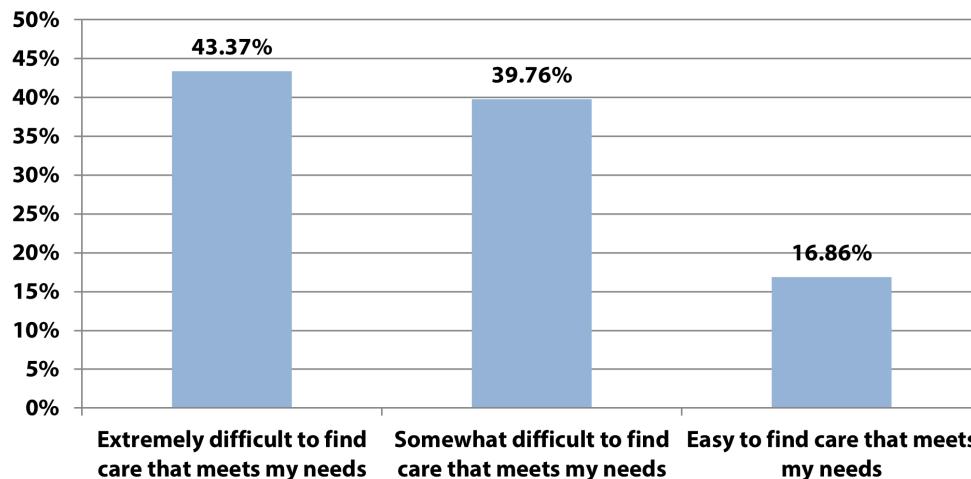


Other write-in responses were:

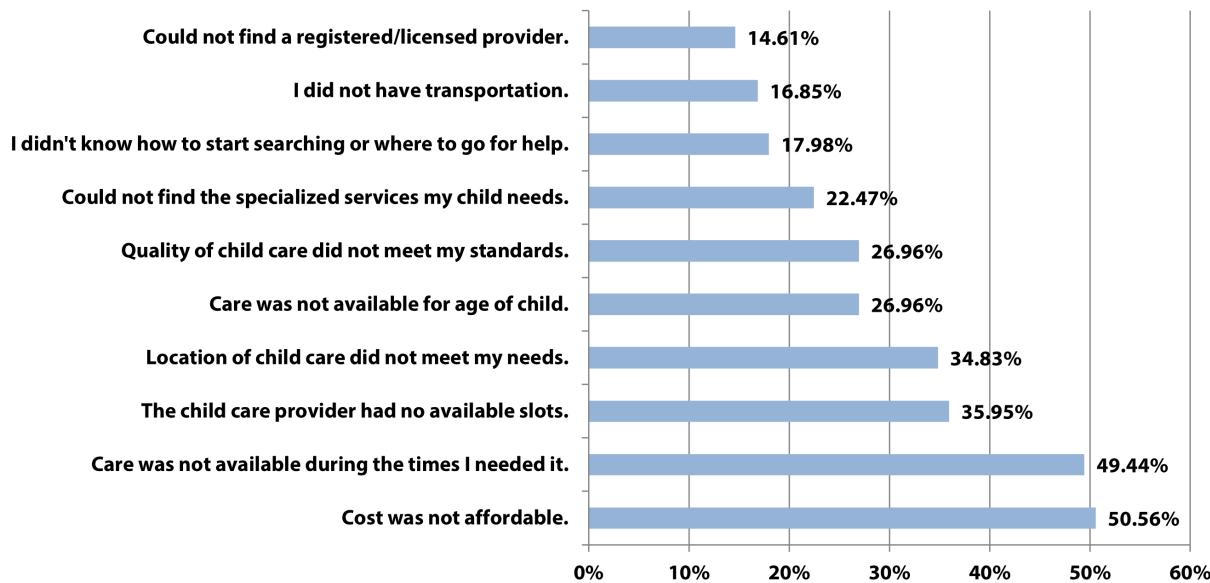
WIC	5
Section 8	4
Funding for schools/colleges	2
HUD Housing programs	1
DADS/Fatherhood	1
Community Services Block Grant	1
Child food programs	1
Child care subsidies	1
Meals on Wheels	1
College financial aid	1
Housing rehabilitation programs	1
Care for children/seniors/disabled	1

## 14. If you have had to search for child care in the last 12 months, how would you describe the experience?

If you have had to search for child care in the last 12 months, how would you describe the experience?

15. If you had difficulty finding child care, what are the most common barriers you have experienced? (choose up to 4)  
Other write-in responses were:

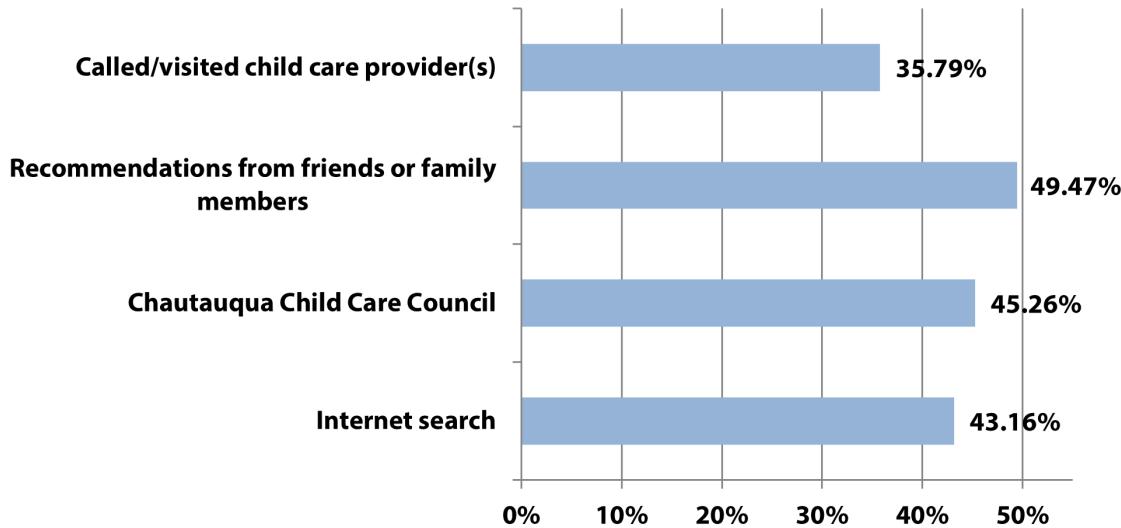
If you had difficulty finding child care, what are the most common barriers you have experienced? (choose up to 4)



Could not find placement for unvaccinated child	1
Workers at the facility were racist, unhelpful, and unknowledgeable.	1
No one bothered to call me back.	1

## 16. What resources have you used to search for child care? (Check up to 2)

What resources have you used to search for child care?  
(Check up to 2)

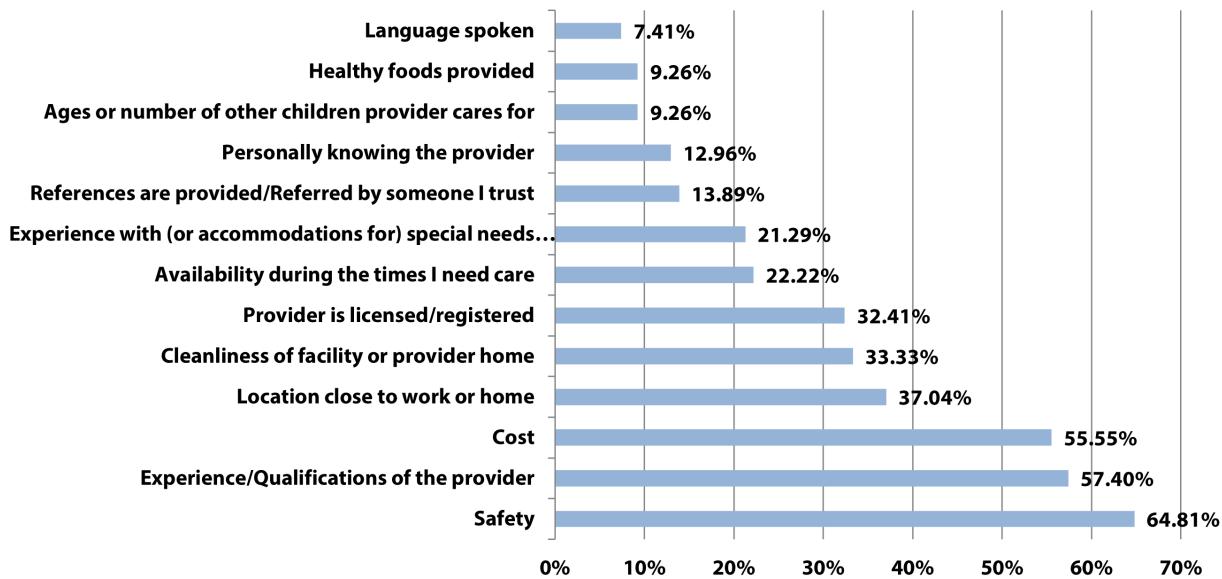


Other write-in responses were:

OCFS website	1
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## 17. What is most important to you when searching for a child care provider? (choose up to 4)

What is most important to you when searching for a child care provider?  
(choose up to 4)

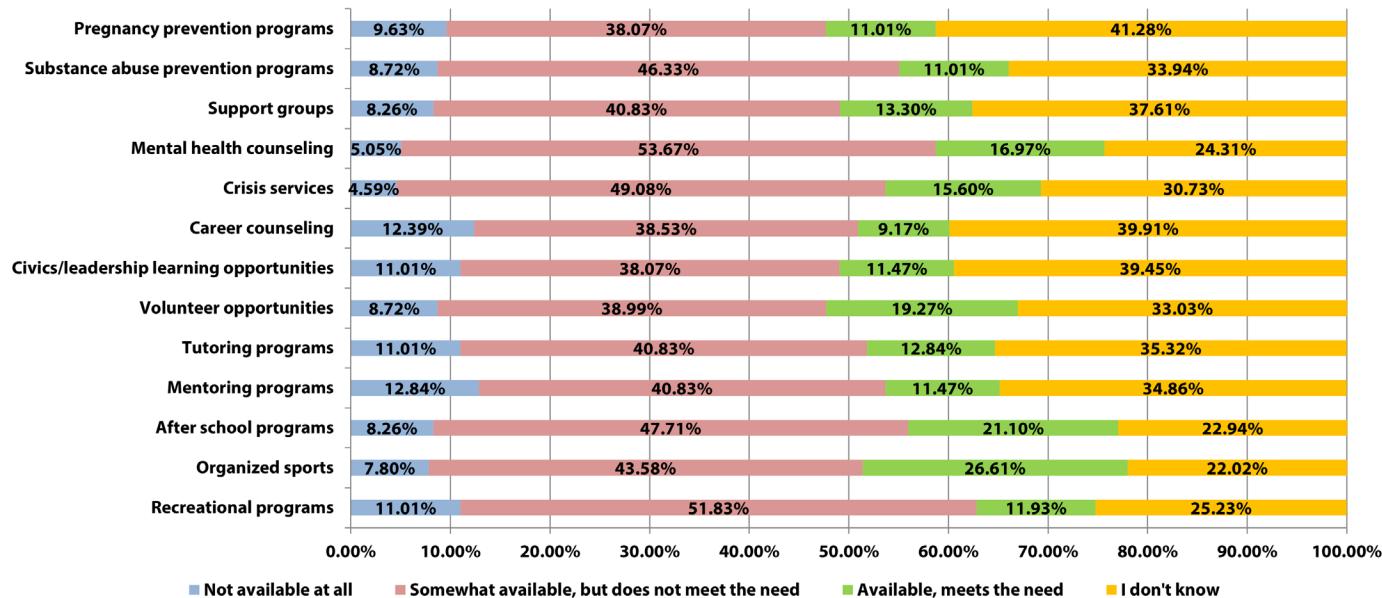


## 18. Are you aware of the NY State Child Care Assistance Program that helps families with the cost of child care?

assistance.

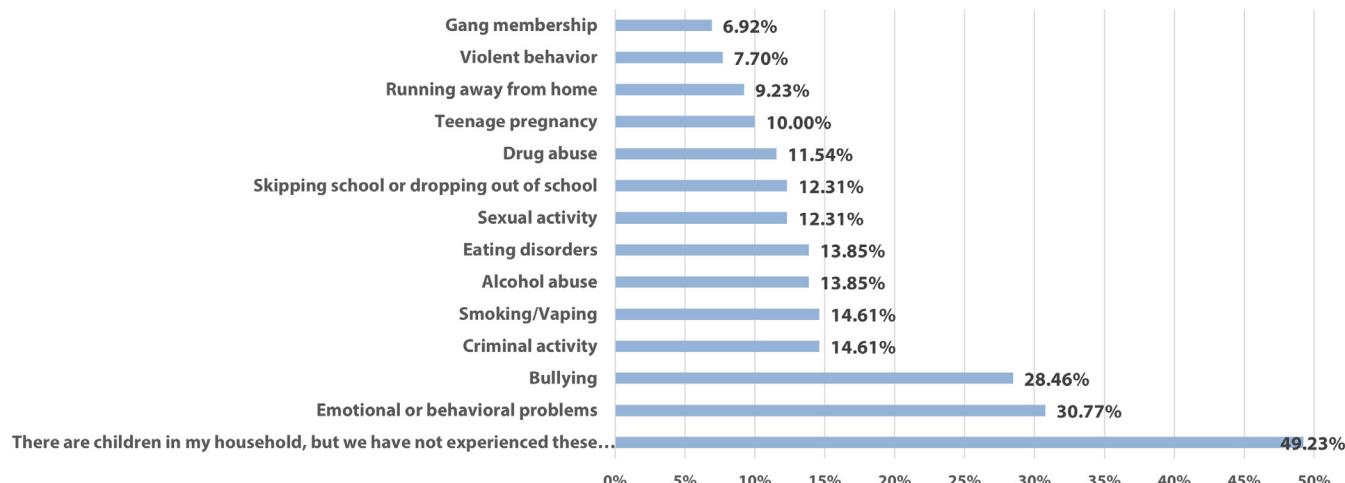
**19. Please rate the availability of the following services/opportunities for children and youth in Chautauqua**

Please rate the availability of the following services/opportunities for children and youth in Chautauqua County from your experience.



**20. Have any of the following been an issue for concern for any of the youth (under 18) in your household in the past 12 months? (check all that apply)**

Have any of the following been an issue for concern for any of the youth (under 18) in your household in the past 12 months? (check all that apply)



**21. What is your primary method of transportation? (select one)**

	Percentage	Number
Personal vehicle that is owned by me or someone in my household	74.31%	162
Rely on rides from friends or family members	9.63%	21
Walking	6.42%	14
Public transportation such as CHQ Transit (formerly CARTS) or other bus service	4.13%	9
Ride sharing (Uber, Lyft)	2.75%	6
Taxi	1.38%	3
Bicycle	1.38%	3

**22. Do you have at least one computer, laptop, or tablet in your home?**

	Percentage	Number
Yes	89.91%	196
No	10.09%	22

**23. Do you have access to the internet in your home?**

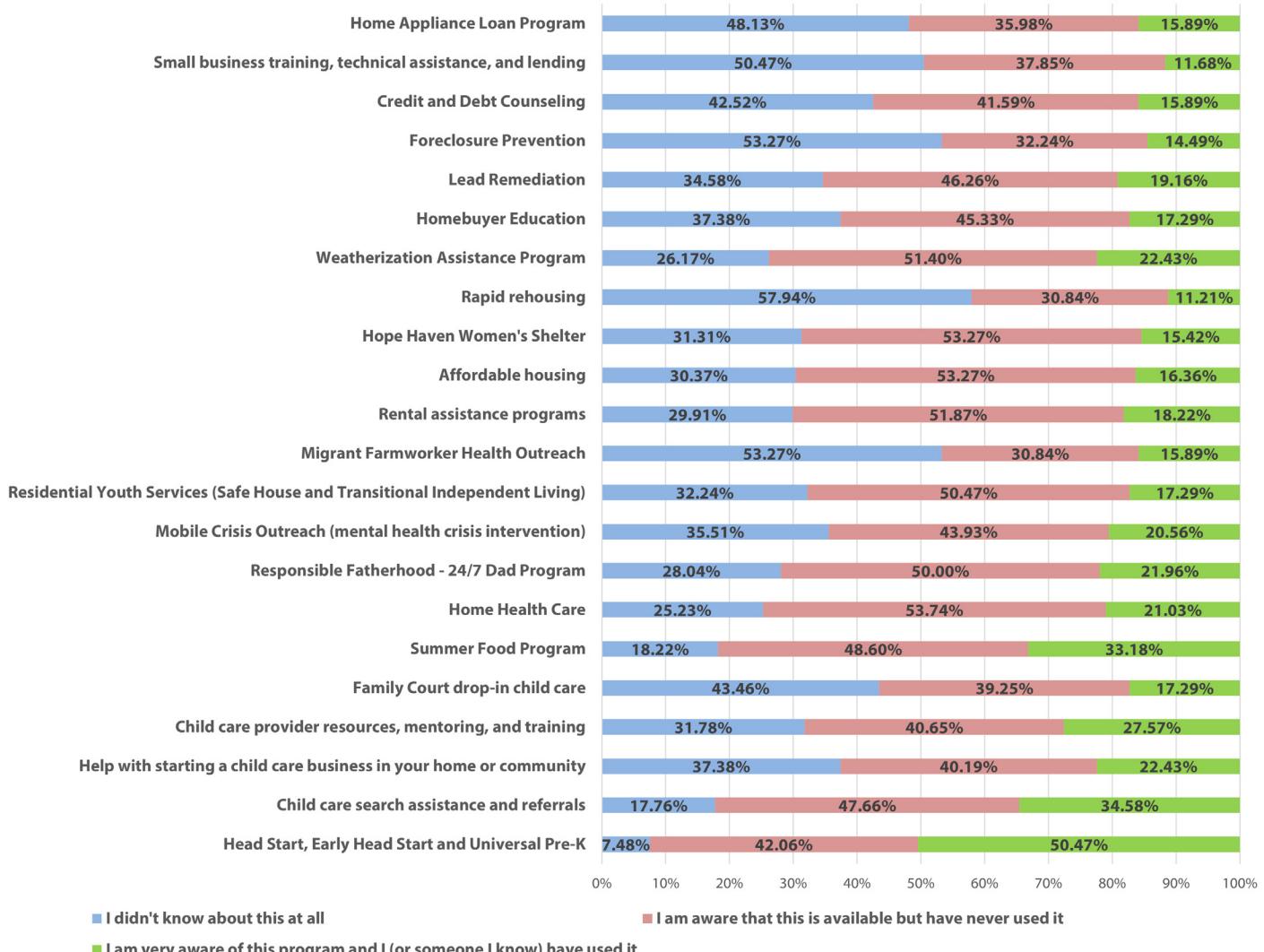
	Percentage	Number
Yes	95.87%	209
No	4.13%	9

**24. What type of phone do you primarily use?**

	Percentage	Number
Smart phone	84.40%	184
Cell phone that's not a smart phone	11.47%	25
Landline	4.13%	9

**25. Please tell us how familiar you are with these services provided by Chautauqua Opportunities, Inc.:**

**How familiar are you with COI's services?**



**Demographic Questions****26. What is your gender?**

	Percentage	Number
Female	86.89%	179
Male	9.22%	19
Prefer not to answer	3.88%	8

**27. What is your age?**

	Percentage	Number
Under 18	0.00%	0
18-24	5.83%	12
25-34	19.90%	41
35-44	21.84%	45
45-54	20.39%	42
55-64	20.39%	42
65+	11.65%	2

**28. What is your zip code?**

	Percentage	Number
14701 Jamestown	30.58%	63
14048 Dunkirk	17.96%	37
14063 Fredonia	13.11%	27
14722 Falconer	5.34%	11
14710 Ashville	2.91%	6
14716 Brocton	2.91%	6
14062 Forestville	2.91%	6
14750 Lakewood	2.43%	5
14757 Mayville	1.94%	4
14787 Westfield	1.94%	4
14718 Cassadaga	1.46%	3
14722 Chautauqua	1.46%	3
14747 Kennedy	1.46%	3
14767 Panama	1.46%	3
14775 Ripley	1.46%	3
14138 South Dayton	1.46%	2
14712 Bemus Point	0.97%	2
14720 Celoron	0.97%	2
14738 Frewsburg	0.97%	2
14784 Stockton	0.97%	2
14723 Cherry Creek	0.49%	1
14724 Clymer	0.49%	1
14728 Dewittville	0.49%	1

14732 Ellington	0.49%	1
14740 Gerry	0.49%	1
14081 Irving	0.49%	1
14769 Portland	0.49%	1
14136 Silver Creek	0.49%	1
14782 Sinclairville	0.49%	1
14785 Stow	0.49%	1
16365 Warren, PA	0.49%	1

**29. How many people live in your household?**

	Percentage	Number
One	12.62%	26
Two	33.50%	69
Three	22.33%	46
Four	15.53%	32
Five	10.19%	21
Six or more	5.83%	12

**30. Do you rent or own your home?**

	Percentage	Number
Rent	33.98%	70
Own	62.62%	129
Currently homeless/staying with someone else	3.4%	7

**31. Please choose the family type that best describes your household (adults are defined as age 18 and over).**

	Percentage	Number
I live alone	12.62%	26
One adult, plus one or more children	12.62%	26
Two adults, plus one or more children	34.47%	71
Two adults, no children	27.18%	56
Three or more adults, no children	5.83%	12
Three or more adults, plus one or more children	7.28%	15

**32. What race do you consider yourself?**

	Percentage	Number
White or Caucasian	85.44%	176
Black or African American	5.83%	12
Asian	0.97%	2
Native American	0.97%	2
Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.00%	0

Some other race	2.43%	5
Two or more races	4.37%	9

**33. Are you Hispanic?**

	Percentage	Number
Yes	9.71%	20
No	90.29%	186

**34. What is your annual household income?**

	Percentage	Number
Under \$10,000	9.27%	19
Between \$10,000 and \$19,999	8.29%	17
Between \$20,000 and \$29,999	12.20%	25
Between \$30,000 and \$39,999	8.78%	18
Between \$40,000 and \$49,999	8.78%	18
Between \$50,000 and \$59,999	11.71%	24
Between \$60,000 and \$69,999	3.9%	8
Between \$70,000 and \$79,999	9.27%	19
Between \$80,000 and \$99,999	13.17%	27
\$100,000 or more	7.8%	16
Prefer not to answer	6.83%	14

# Appendix II: Commentary by COI Board of Directors

## INTRODUCTION

Chautauqua Opportunities, Inc. must adhere to national standards as a Community Action Agency that include maintaining a tripartite Board of Directors. This means that the Board must be made up in equal parts of representatives of the public sector (elected officials), private sector (the business community) and target sector (low-income people or organizations that serve them). At their Retreat in July 2025, COI's Board of Directors broke into small groups to discuss the following issues relevant to Chautauqua County residents. The following is a summary of those discussions.

## RESULTS

**1. What would be the impact on families and the community if programs such as Medicaid, SNAP, and Social Security are reduced or eliminated?**

Reducing or eliminating programs like Medicaid, SNAP, and Social Security would have a profound and harmful impact on families and communities. These cuts would exacerbate financial hardships for individuals and households already facing economic challenges. A reduction in SNAP benefits would increase food insecurity, potentially leading to malnutrition and starvation, especially among children and vulnerable adults. Cuts to Medicaid would limit access to essential healthcare services—including preventive care, treatments, and emergency services—resulting in poorer health outcomes, increased mortality, and additional strain on hospitals, nursing homes, and other healthcare providers. For many seniors, Social Security is their sole source of income; without it, they may be unable to afford basic necessities. Overall, these reductions would likely lead to a rise in homelessness and contribute to a surge in mental health issues, substance abuse, and domestic violence, further destabilizing already vulnerable communities.

**2. Many businesses in Chautauqua County are having difficulty finding employees. Why do you think this is a problem? What can businesses do to help the situation?**

Many job seekers in Chautauqua County are looking for positions that offer at least a living wage and essential benefits like health insurance. In addition to fair compensation, some individuals face barriers such as lack of transportation, limited access to affordable childcare, or gaps in the skills employers are looking for. The high cost of childcare often makes it financially unfeasible for some to accept low-wage jobs. On the other hand, some job seekers may have salary expectations that don't align with the current market. While available opportunities may not be ideal or match long-term career goals, they can still provide valuable experience and a stepping stone toward future advancement.

A cultural shift is also part of the challenge. Many young people are accustomed to quick results and may be less willing to start at entry-level positions and work their way up over time.

To address this issue, there is a clear need for more employability training and education in financial literacy and basic life skills. Expanding programs that focus on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) is critical, as demand for skills in these areas continues to grow. Local colleges should also continue to work closely with employers to ensure their training programs align with current workforce needs.

Lastly, the overall population in Chautauqua County is declining, with many young residents leaving in search of better opportunities. This trend contributes to an aging workforce and further limits the pool of potential employees. Businesses, educational institutions, and community organizations must work together to create a more attractive environment for young workers to stay and thrive.

**3. What are the biggest challenges for someone looking for employment in Chautauqua County?**

Some of the biggest challenges facing individuals seeking employment in Chautauqua County include transportation barriers common in rural areas and a shortage of full-time job opportunities that pay a living wage.

Many job seekers lack the specific skills or credentials that employers require, and some positions demand formal degrees without recognizing relevant life or work experience. Additionally, the high cost of childcare—or the inability to find it at all—can make employment financially unfeasible for parents. Limited opportunities that offer career advancement, along with the difficulty of navigating complex job search and application processes, further hinder residents' ability to secure stable and sustainable employment.

**4. What do you think are the major causes of homelessness in Chautauqua County? What can be done locally to prevent or address homelessness?**

The major causes of homelessness in Chautauqua County include the high cost of living, mental health challenges, and drug addiction. The closure of factories and businesses has also reduced available employment opportunities, making it harder for residents to maintain stable housing. Additionally, the county's high rate of poverty contributes to financial instability for many individuals and families. High property taxes, especially for those on fixed incomes, further strain limited resources and can push vulnerable residents into homelessness.

To prevent or address homelessness locally, efforts should focus on developing more affordable and permanent housing options. Providing intensive case management can help individuals and families access the services they need to achieve stability. Expanding resources and support for mental health, addiction recovery, and domestic violence is also essential, as these issues often contribute to homelessness. Increasing public awareness of available resources and the growing need for assistance can strengthen community engagement, while enhancing prevention programs and supports can help people remain housed before crises occur.

**5. Why do you think Chautauqua County has high rates of alcohol and substance abuse? What is needed to combat the problem?**

Many individuals turn to drugs or alcohol as a way to self-medicate for untreated medical or mental health conditions. The lack of employment opportunities and limited activities for youth contribute to feelings of boredom, frustration, and hopelessness, which can increase the risk of substance use. Additionally, the easy accessibility of drugs in the area makes it more difficult to prevent and control addiction within the community.

To combat the problem, a comprehensive approach is needed that includes education, treatment, social and emotional supports, and early intervention. Education can raise awareness about the dangers of substance use and help individuals make informed choices. Strengthening social and emotional supports provides people with healthier coping mechanisms and a stronger sense of community connection. Additionally, ensuring access to early prenatal care can help address and reduce the number of babies born with withdrawal symptoms.

**6. What do you think are the greatest challenges for families needing childcare?**

The greatest challenges for families needing childcare in Chautauqua County include a lack of available childcare slots and the high cost of care, which many families find unaffordable. In addition, some parents perceive that there is stigma when seeking or accepting financial assistance for childcare. Many families also lack support from relatives or extended family members who could help with child supervision, and there are very limited options for childcare during non-traditional work hours, making it especially difficult for parents working evenings, nights, or weekends to find consistent and reliable care.

**7. Why does Chautauqua County have a shortage of childcare providers?**

Chautauqua County faces a shortage of childcare providers for several reasons. Operating a childcare business involves many regulations and high costs, which often outweigh potential profits, making it difficult for providers to sustain operations. There is also a shortage of qualified workers, as the required credentials and responsibilities can be demanding compared to the pay offered. Additionally, the liability and insurance costs associated with caring for other people's children deter some from entering the field. Above all, the need to ensure children's safety and maintain the trust of parents sets a high standard that not all potential providers feel equipped to meet, further limiting the number of available childcare options.

# Appendix III: Community Conversations

## INTRODUCTION

COI hosts Community Conversations meetings on a quarterly basis that are open to the public. Participants of the virtual Community Conversations meeting held on August 14, 2025 were asked to discuss the following issues, and their comments are summarized. The meeting was attended by 29 community residents and COI staff members.

### **1. What would be the impact on your family if programs such as Medicaid, SNAP, HEAP or Social Security are reduced or eliminated?**

These cuts would have a serious impact on local families and individuals. Food stamps (SNAP) help a lot of people who are struggling to find employment in our rural area where job opportunities are limited compared to larger cities like New York City. Programs like HEAP are also essential during the winter months to help families heat their homes and losing that assistance could force people to choose between paying for food, heat, or other necessities. Access to medical care, prescriptions, and preventive services would suffer if Medicaid is cut, which are critical for children, seniors, and individuals with health conditions. Overall, reducing or eliminating these programs would increase financial strain, health risks, and instability for many low-income families in our area.

### **2. What barriers have you faced while looking for childcare?**

Some of the biggest barriers include a lack of available providers, especially those who can take multiple children from the same family. Transportation is another major challenge — without reliable transportation, it's difficult to get children to and from care on time. The cost of childcare is also a significant burden. Even with assistance programs, the out-of-pocket expenses can still be more than what many families can afford, especially when working low-wage or part-time jobs.

### **3. What health care issues are you most concerned about? (Access to health care, access to affordable health insurance, mental health, substance use treatment, care for the elderly, food, transportation, other).**

One of the biggest concerns about health care is access, especially in our rural area where services are limited and some hospitals are at risk of closing. Mental health services are another major issue—appointments can be difficult to find, and even with insurance, visits can cost around \$150 each, which puts them out of reach for many people. Dental care is also a big concern. While Medicaid helps cover some costs, not all providers accept it, and the out-of-pocket expenses can still be too high for people with limited incomes.

### **4. Do you believe that the services for health care are adequate in our county? If not, please explain what resources would be helpful.**

Health care services in our county are not adequate. Mental health care, in particular, is one of the most difficult services to access, with long wait times and few available providers. Dental care is also a major concern because it is very expensive, and many people cannot afford it even with insurance. There is also a lack of OB/GYN care in the area, which makes it challenging for women to get the

reproductive health services they need. Improving transportation would make a big difference—expanding CARTS bus routes, increasing public transportation options, and providing door-to-door service for people with special needs would help residents reach medical appointments more easily. It would also be helpful to share more information about existing bus routes and transportation resources. In addition, offering community driver's license programs or having the DMV provide driving lessons could help more people become independent and able to travel to appointments or work.

## **5. What types of new businesses would be beneficial to the community?**

New businesses that would be beneficial to the community include entertainment venues that are family-friendly rather than bars. There is a lack of safe and affordable spaces for teens to spend their time. An indoor community center or skating rink would provide a place where young people, especially those aged 13 to 17, could gather in a safe environment. Having additional, well-managed indoor spaces for recreation and socializing would give teens positive options for entertainment and help strengthen community connections for families.

## **6. Do you have concerns regarding the current rental market or housing conditions?**

Rent prices are extremely high, making it nearly impossible for many families to keep up with bills while covering basic living expenses. In addition, the condition of some rental properties is very poor, with issues like mold, roaches, and general neglect that affect health and safety. Another challenge is that some rental units in the area are only available to college students, which limits options for local families and working residents.

## **7. How concerned are you about the presence of lead-based paint in your house?**

Lead-based paint in local homes is extremely concerning because it causes developmental delays in young children. One community member relayed information about personal experience with her son's developmental problems due to an elevated blood lead level.

## **8. What are the biggest factors that might hold someone back from pursuing homeownership?**

The biggest factors that might hold someone back from pursuing homeownership include challenges with building good credit, which makes it difficult to qualify for a mortgage. Some people have large amounts of student loan debt, which limits what they can spend for a down payment or monthly mortgage payments. Additionally, many people are unsure if they want to stay in the area long-term, which makes them hesitant to make a big financial commitment.

