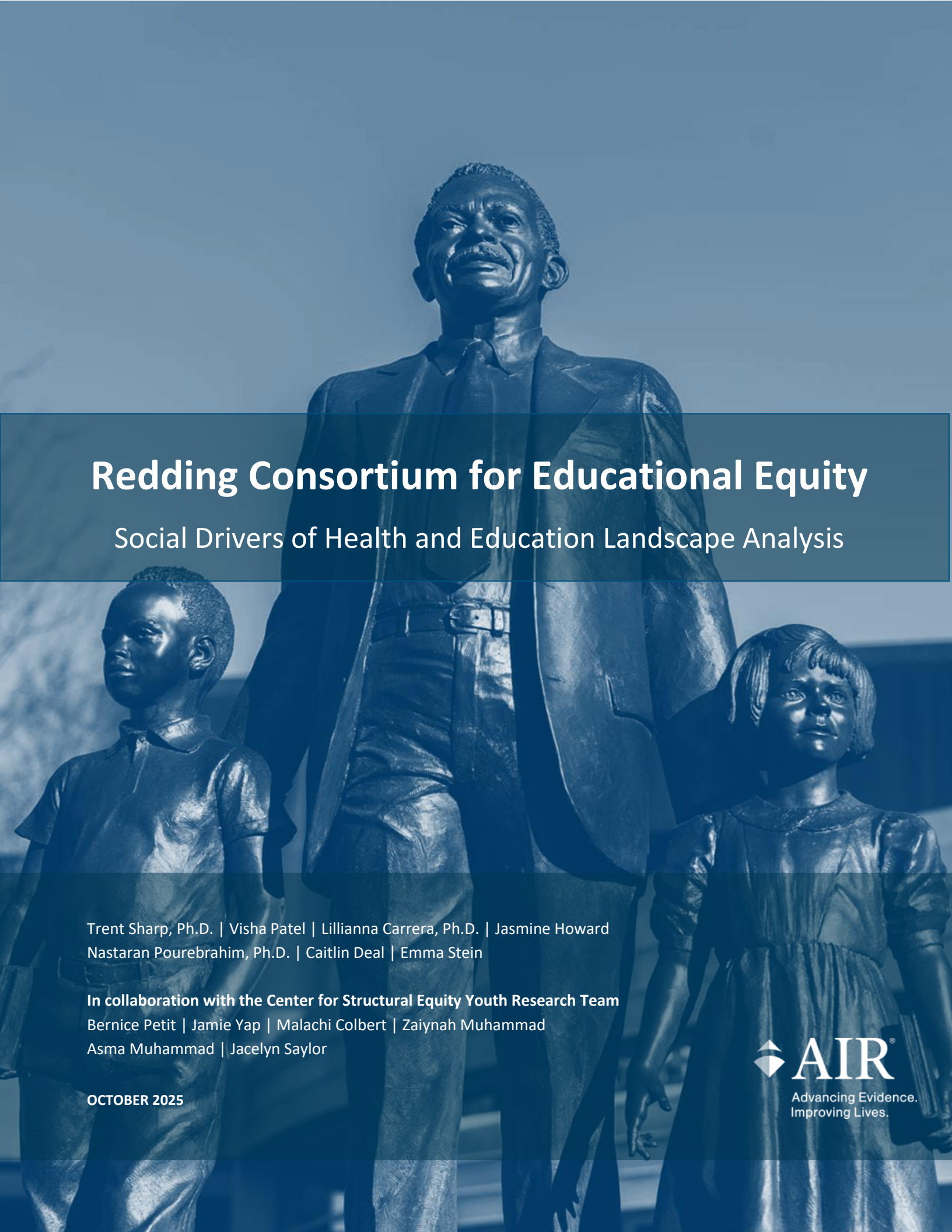




Redding Consortium for Educational Equity

Social Drivers of Health and Education Landscape Analysis

Trent Sharp, Ph.D. | Visha Patel | Lillianna Carrera, Ph.D. | Jasmine Howard
Nastaran Pourebrahim, Ph.D. | Caitlin Deal | Emma Stein

In collaboration with the Center for Structural Equity Youth Research Team
Bernice Petit | Jamie Yap | Malachi Colbert | Zaiynah Muhammad
Asma Muhammad | Jacelyn Saylor

OCTOBER 2025



Advancing Evidence.
Improving Lives.

Contents

Executive Summary.....	1
Acknowledgments.....	2
Overview: Defining Social Drivers of Health and Education	5
Overview: A Strong Community Addressing Social Drivers	6
Overview: The Four-District System	7
Overview: Differences in Access to Social Driver Resources	9
Overview: Longstanding Neighborhood Differences.....	10
Overview: Current Demographic and Academic Trends	11
Overview: School Choice.....	13
Overview: Navigating School Choice and the Four-District System	14
Overview: Key Social Drivers Impacting Health and Education.....	16
Key Social Driver: Public Safety.....	18
Spotlight on Cross-Cutting Issues: After-School Programs.....	23
Key Social Driver: Mental Health	24
Spotlight on Cross-Cutting Topics: Chronic Absenteeism.....	28
Key Social Driver: Housing Instability	29
Spotlight on Cross-Cutting Topic: Student Mobility	33
Key Social Driver: Transportation	34
Conclusion.....	37

Executive Summary

For over 70 years, the city of Wilmington has been at the center of efforts to create a more equitable educational system. A recurring theme throughout this history has been the reliance on structural changes. From mandatory busing between the city of Wilmington and its suburbs, to dividing the city amongst four northern New Castle County school districts, eliminating busing, and expanding school choice—past efforts focused on structures and operational changes instead of the underlying conditions that impact students’ ability to access educational options and thrive.

The Redding Consortium for Educational Equity seeks to dismantle the four-district school system that currently divides the city of Wilmington. It recognizes that simply changing district boundaries is not enough and is seeking additional state funding to expand wraparound services that address the social drivers of health and education – the factors outside of schools that impact students’ health and educational opportunity.

To support this important work, the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) partnered with a Youth Research Team from the Center for Structural Equity to conduct a Social Drivers of Health and Education Landscape Analysis. Our team identified four social drivers that students, parents, educators, and community partners believe have the biggest impact on students’ health and educational opportunities.



Public Safety. Students are avoiding school options, parks, public transportation, and community centers due to concerns about their safety. Parents and students described regular encounters with gun violence, fighting, and public drug use, leaving many families to choose isolation at home versus engagement with school and community.



Mental Health. Students, parents, school personnel, and community providers all highlighted mental health as a fast-growing challenge for many students and parents—especially those dealing with housing instability and community violence. Mental health service availability is mixed, and uptake is limited due to social stigmas, cost, and lack of awareness of options.



Housing. A growing number of lower-income families are unable to grow roots in their schools and community due to housing insecurity. Rising housing costs are forcing parents to choose between working extra jobs and being less present or moving to cheaper housing and interrupting their child’s academics and relationships with peers and teachers.



Transportation. Students, parents, and after-school providers described complex barriers to transportation that limit students’ options. Some barriers were structural, such as misaligned scheduling and no busing for school choice. Others were rooted in safety concerns as students and parents described navigating community violence and dangerous roadways.

Neighborhoods like Southbridge, Hedgeville, Browntown, Hilltop, Vendevere Avenue, Eastlawn, and Riverside experience these social drivers more acutely; however, it is crucial to stress that these social drivers can and be addressed through thoughtful policies and programs. This report highlights the need for more streamlined district structures along with robust wraparound services that are as interconnected, comprehensive, and impactful as the social drivers they hope to change.

Acknowledgments

This report would not be possible without the time and energy of the city of Wilmington residents who have dedicated themselves to the health and well-being of their children, schools, and community.

A Special Thanks to Staff at the Following Organizations for Their Support

- Children and Family First
- Christina Cultural Arts Center
- City of Wilmington Parks & Recreation
- Communities in Schools
- Cultural Restoration Project
- Delaware Department of Education Technology & Data Office
- Delaware Institute for Arts in Education
- Kingswood Community Center
- Latin American Community Center
- Leap of Faith
- Police Athletic League of Wilmington
- The Warehouse
- Walnut Street YMCA
- West End Neighborhood House
- Westside Family Healthcare
- William Hicks Anderson Community Center
- Wilmington Housing Authority
- Wilmington Learning Collaborative

We are most grateful to the **community elders, local leaders, parents, students, and staff from schools and community organizations** who took time to share their stories and experiences with us. To each of you, thank you—this work would not exist without you.

We are especially grateful for the Redding Consortium for Education Equity Leadership Team, including **Raye Jones Avery, Superintendent Dr. Dorrell Green, Alaina Robinson, Dr. Shelley Rouser, Dr. Cora Scott, Dr. Paulette Gaddy, Kelly Sherretz, and Haley Burns**. They worked long hours and provided essential guidance and support to ensure our work was successful.

We also would like to extend our sincerest thanks to **Senator Elizabeth “Tizzy” Lockman, Representative Nnamdi Chukwuocha, and Matt Denn** for your leadership and support throughout this study.

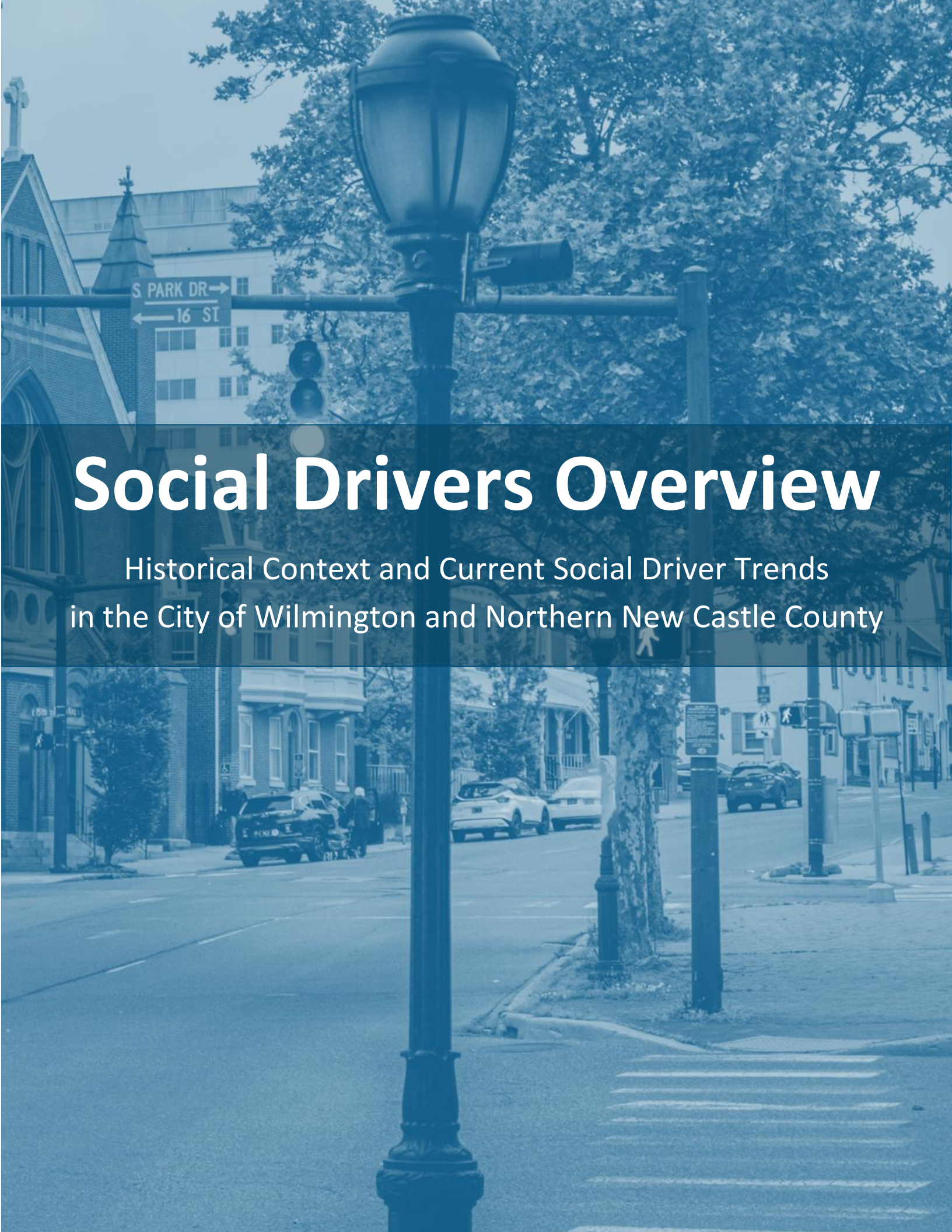
We owe a special debt of gratitude to some exceptional partners and community leaders who dedicated time and effort to support our data collection efforts, including **Helen Anderson, Jennifer Thomas, Melody Phillips, and Regina Ransom**.

Lastly, thank you **Darryl Chambers, Lidia Villarruel, and Dr. Yasser Payne** from the Center for Structural Equity for your guidance and partnership in recruiting and supporting the Youth Research Team. Their contributions were invaluable and would not have happened without you.

Acknowledgments

We would also like to extend our heartfelt thanks to the following individuals who joined us to review and discuss initial findings during the community co-interpretation event on September 27, 2025. Your experiences and insights have added nuance to this report that we could not have gathered any other way. We are deeply grateful for your knowledge, engagement, and commitment to improving the social drivers of health and education for students in the city of Wilmington.

Valerie Jermusyk	LaRetha Odumosu	Megan Stern
Monica Moriak	Tiffany Lockridge	Joyce Dixon
Louis Fuhrmann	Valerie Brown	Bernice Petit
Helen Fuhrmann	Jim Martin	Jamie Yap
Rep. Frank Burns	Nick Konzelman	Lidia Villarruel
Kim Morton	Alethea Smith-Tucker	Michelle Suchyj
Yvonne Thomas	James Taylor	Tessa Wallace
Patricia Eafford	Equetta Jones	Margie López Waite
Julia Zammith	Jacelyn Saylor	Alexis Ferrell
Trisha Moses	Zaiynah Muhammad	Kevin Potts
Shannon McKenna	Norine Seth	Coby Owens
Jim Simmons	Amy Solomon	Paulette Moore
Sheronda King	Karen Eller	Irene Hairston
Lavina Jones-Davis	Tika Hartsock	Susan Butcher
Dan Cruce	Joe Walls	Adolphus Fletcher
Lisa Lawson	Carlton Lampkins	Rep. Nnamdi Chukwuocha
Isaac Anderson	Regina Sidney-Brown	Matt Denn
Helen Anderson	Cristina Leach	Raye Jones Avery
Sen. Elizabeth Lockman	Supt. Dorrell Green	Alaina Robinson
Shelley Rouser	Kelly Sherretz	Haley Burns
Darryl Chambers	Lavocia Callahan	Nikerray Middlebrook
Maurice Backus	Yasser Payne	Asma Muhammad
Malachi Colbert	Cimone Sylver	Jon Sheehan
Kevin Kelley	John Skrobot	Councilwoman Zanthia Oliver
Councilman Coby Owens	Sen. Dan Cruce	Ashlee Woods
Ashley Wilkinson	Pamela Foster	



Social Drivers Overview

Historical Context and Current Social Driver Trends
in the City of Wilmington and Northern New Castle County

Overview: Defining Social Drivers of Health and Education

What are Social Drivers of Health and Education?

Social Drivers of Health and Education (“social drivers”) are the factors *outside of school* that impact students’ access to healthy living and educational opportunity.

For some, these factors—like access to affordable housing, safe neighborhoods, and reliable transportation—combine to create a path toward success and well-being. But for others, these same forces can make even the simplest aspects of life a struggle.

It's important to understand that these outcomes are not inevitable. The purpose of identifying and understanding social drivers is to recognize that they are not fixed and can be changed through smart policies and programs.

What are examples of social drivers?



Access to after-school enrichment and support



Stable and affordable housing



Access to safe and affordable transportation



Routine and accessible healthcare



Safe streets, schools, and neighborhoods



Access to jobs and fair pay

What social driver data is included in this report?

To understand the current landscape and impact of social drivers, we collected data focused on the city of Wilmington and northern New Castle County:

- **116 people shared their experiences in interviews or focus groups.** This included 34 students, 30 parents and guardians, 17 school staff, and 35 staff from organizations, including community leaders.
- **69 people responded to two surveys conducted by the Youth Research Team** from the Center for Structural Equity. This included 53 students and 16 parents.
- **We examined data for 8,848 students over three school years (2022–2025)** to understand the relationship between social drivers and where students live and attend school.
- **We updated existing community asset data and collected additional community assets for a total of 684 community organizations** in the city of Wilmington to understand the current availability of services.
- **We reviewed 15 prior research studies and five national data sets** to understand longstanding patterns and prior efforts to address social drivers in the city of Wilmington.
- **77 individuals met for a community co-interpretation** to review initial findings in this report and provide additional details and recommendations for further action.

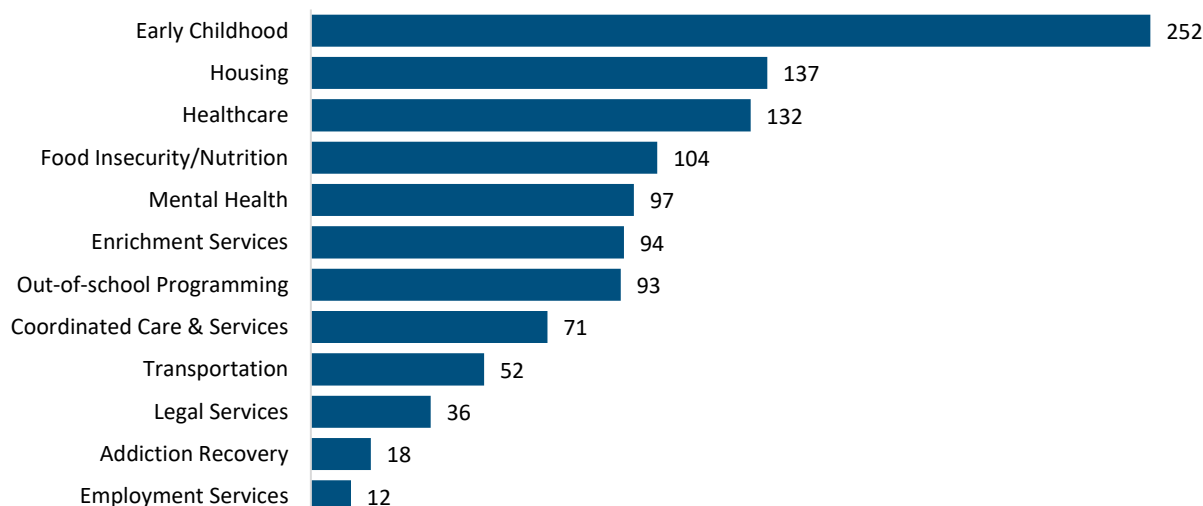
Overview: A Strong Community Addressing Social Drivers

The city of Wilmington is a tight-knit community with a long legacy of neighborly support and a deep history of advocacy. As we asked interview and focus group participants to describe their city, the overwhelming sentiment was that residents look out for one another, and generations of community leaders have worked to improve conditions for Wilmington youth.

“There is a sense of love. There’s a sense of, ‘Hey, I know you,’ and ‘Oh, you grew up with my mom.’”
-Community Center Staff

Within the city of Wilmington, there is a large and active ecosystem of community organizations and school-based providers who are tirelessly working to support students and families and address social drivers. For example, in the city alone, there are 137 programs or organizations working to support stable and affordable housing, 97 options for mental health services, and 52 places to access transportation supports. Figure 1 depicts the number of different programs in the city of Wilmington addressing social drivers. Numerous organizations like the William “Hicks” Anderson Community Center and Latin American Community Center are one-stop shops to access most of these supports.

Figure 1: Number of Community Programs Addressing Social Drivers in the City of Wilmington



Source: Community Asset Dataset, AIR and the University of Delaware Institute for Public Administration

Note: The early childhood figures include larger providers along with small providers and licensed individuals who may only serve small numbers of children. Also, out-of-school programming does not include extracurricular activities offered at schools (e.g., sports, ROTC).

However, despite these strong community assets, many families and students still face significant challenges. The very same social drivers that create hardship can also make it difficult for some families to access the resources that would help them. For example, while there are 252 licensed childcare providers, we heard across interviews that older siblings are not accessing school options and extracurriculars due to a lack of affordable childcare options. Therefore, it's not simply a question of providing more resources but also addressing the barriers preventing access.

Overview: The Four-District System

School districts can be powerful engines for coordinating school and community-based resources that address social drivers (“wraparound services”). The Redding Consortium recognizes that the current four-district system in the city of Wilmington diminishes this potential. Figures 2 and 3 show the geography of the four-district model, and Figure 4 depicts the distribution of students in 2024. While the Wilmington Learning Collaborative has worked to bring cohesion and focus for a core network of school communities in the city of Wilmington, it is clear from this study that the underlying four-district system still creates a fragmented experience for students and families, segregates community engagement and outreach efforts, and does not support intercommunity networks and collaboration.

The experience of school district fragmentation is not limited to students and families. The robust network of organizations and programs dedicated to addressing social drivers must also navigate across four district administrations (and numerous other charter districts and the vocational district), which complicates their efforts to provide and expand services.

Figure 2: Northern New Castle County School Districts

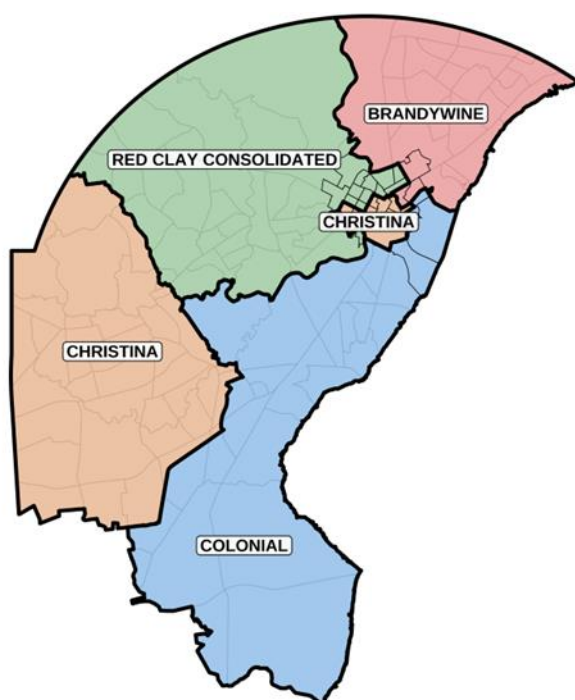


Figure 3: Four School Districts in Wilmington

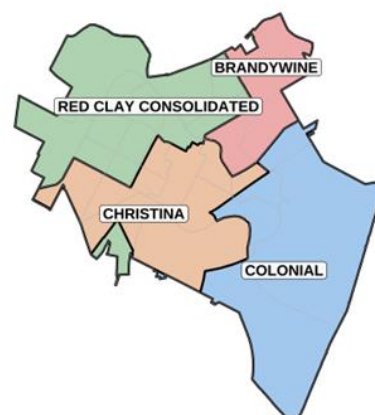
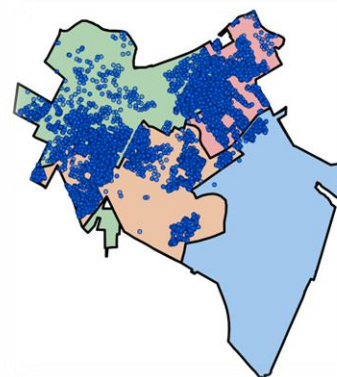


Figure 4: Student Locations (2024–2025 School Year)



NOTE: Wilmington’s four districts have very different relationships with the city. For example, the over 4,000 Wilmington students assigned to Christina are separated by miles from the rest of the district (See Figures 2 and 3). Also, Colonial has no schools within the city limits and serves fewer than 300 city of Wilmington students, who are clustered within a few blocks of Brandywine’s southern border (see blue dots for student density in Figure 4).

Source: Delaware Department of Education Technology & Data Office

Overview: The Four-District System

Student enrollment patterns are heavily skewed to the northern portions of the four-district system. As of the 2024-2025 school year, 84% of the students residing in the city of Wilmington attended either traditional public schools or charter schools that are located in Wilmington city limits or in the northern portions of Red Clay or Brandywine (See Figures 5 and 6 below).

As the Consortium considers the least disruptive options for redistricting, it will be important to consider that few city of Wilmington students are currently choosing to attend schools in the portions of Christina and Colonial that are outside of the city of Wilmington.

Figure 5: Traditional schools attended by city of Wilmington students

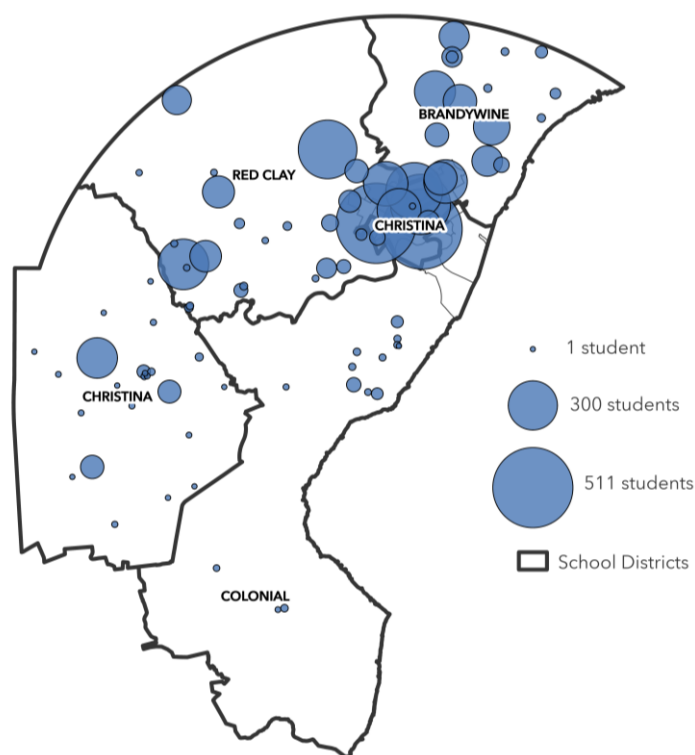
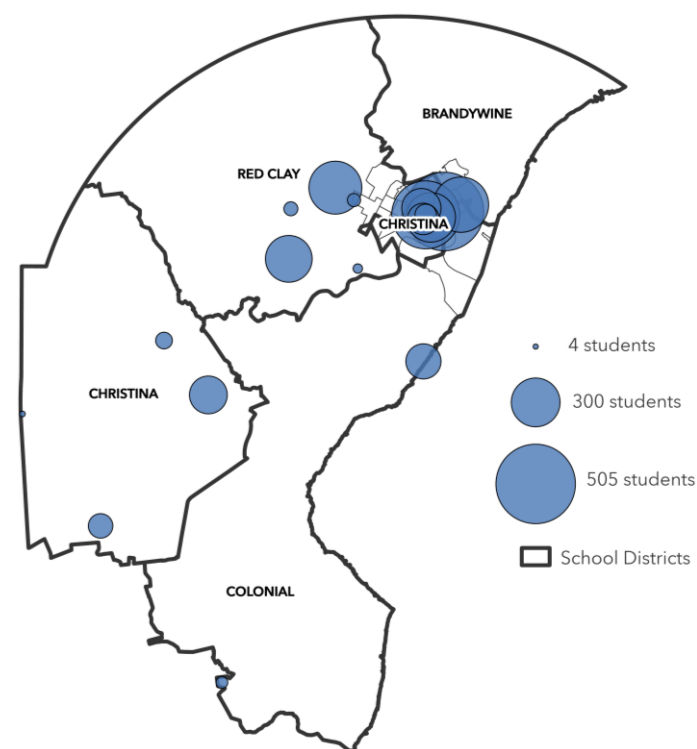


Figure 6: Charter schools attended by city of Wilmington students



Source: Delaware Department of Education Technology & Data Office

Overview: Differences in Access to Social Driver Resources

The city of Wilmington's robust ecosystem of programs that address social drivers aren't equally available in all neighborhoods. The figures below compare the top half of neighborhoods where students live with the top half of neighborhoods where services are located. The blue areas indicate neighborhoods with high concentrations of both students and social driver services. The dark orange areas indicate neighborhoods with high concentrations of students and lower concentrations of services. Across the community asset types, Southbridge, Canby Park, Bayard Square, Hedgeville, Browntown, West City Center, Quaker Hill, Hilltop, Eastlawn, East Side, Brandywine Hills, North West, and 9th Ward reliably had less proximity to nearby resources. Notably, these neighborhoods are spread across all four districts, so the coordination and quality of supports with schools may vary.

Figure 7: Distribution of Afterschool Programs

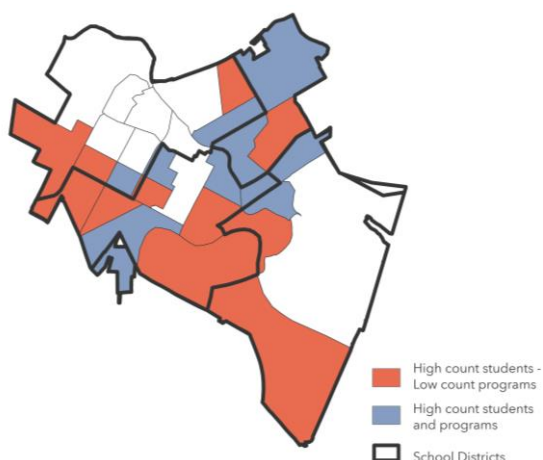


Figure 8: Distribution of Mental Health Programs

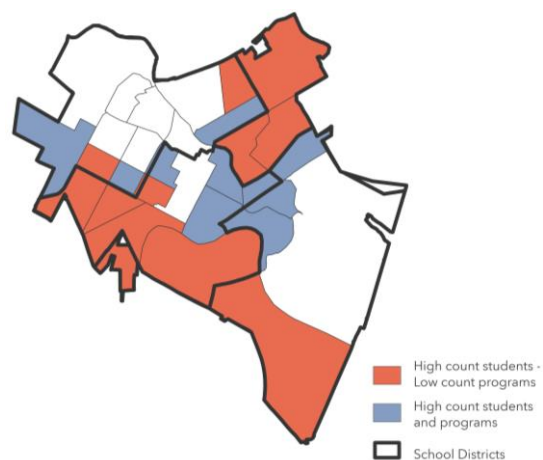


Figure 9: Distribution of Housing Programs

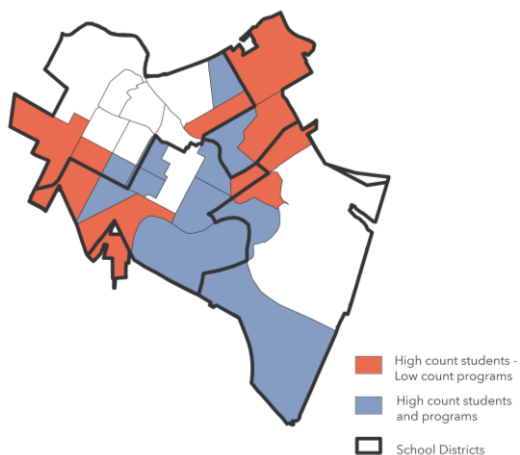
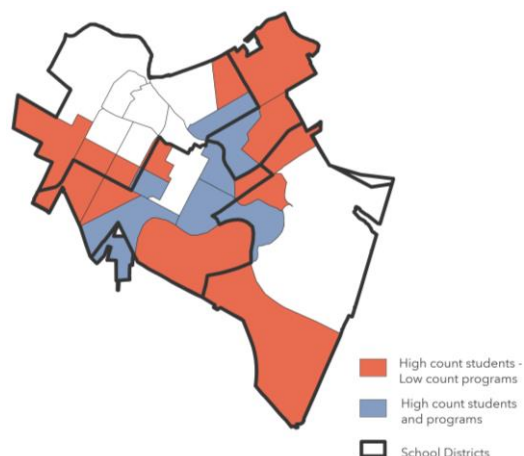


Figure 10: Distribution of Transportation Services



Source: Community Asset Dataset, AIR and the University of Delaware Institute for Public Administration, and Student Enrollment, Delaware Department of Education Technology & Data Office

Overview: Longstanding Neighborhood Differences

In the city of Wilmington, the longstanding differences in how resources are allocated and accessed across neighborhoods has contributed to durable disparities for children who are born and grow up in certain places.

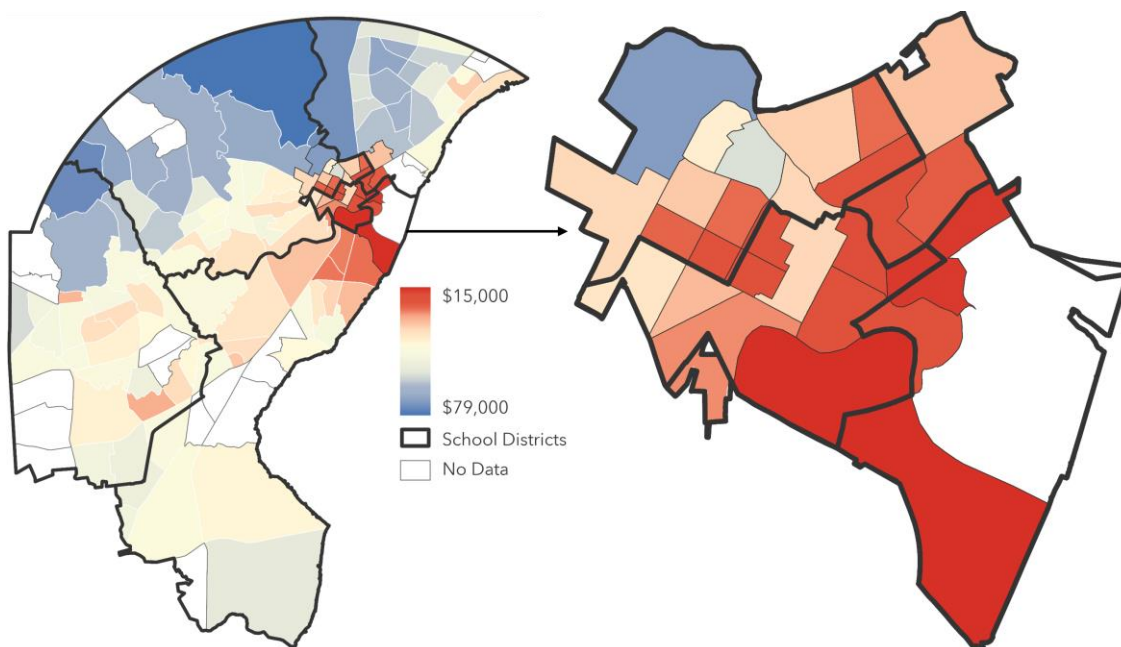
Figure 11 below depicts the long-term economic outcomes for individuals who were born in the city of Wilmington between 1978 and 1983. These individuals would have been school-age in the early years of compulsory busing and the four-district system.

Using data from the Internal Revenue Service, we see that by the time they were in their mid-thirties in 2014–2015, there were stark differences in household income based on the neighborhoods where they were born. Today, many of these individuals would be of age to be the parents, grandparents, and caretakers of current city of Wilmington students.

These data suggest that where a child is born and the resources available to them in that neighborhood as they are growing up are strongly associated with their future success.

By visually depicting the longstanding income inequities in the city, these data highlight the fact that accessing the necessary resources to improve schools in the city of Wilmington will require access to higher tax bases outside of Wilmington. The data also show that any genuine effort to improve health and education for the current generation must include a significant investment in the well-being and stability of their parents.

Figure 11: Average Annual Household Income in 2014–2015 for Individuals Who Were Born in New Castle County and the City of Wilmington Between 1978 and 1983

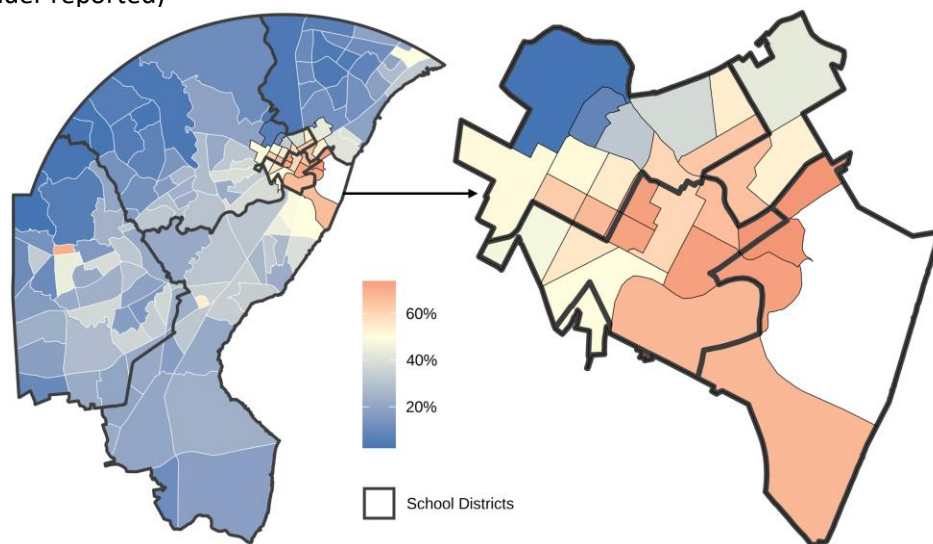


Source: The Opportunity Atlas: Mapping Economic Mobility Across the U.S., Opportunity Insights and the U.S. Census Bureau.

Overview: Current Demographic and Academic Trends

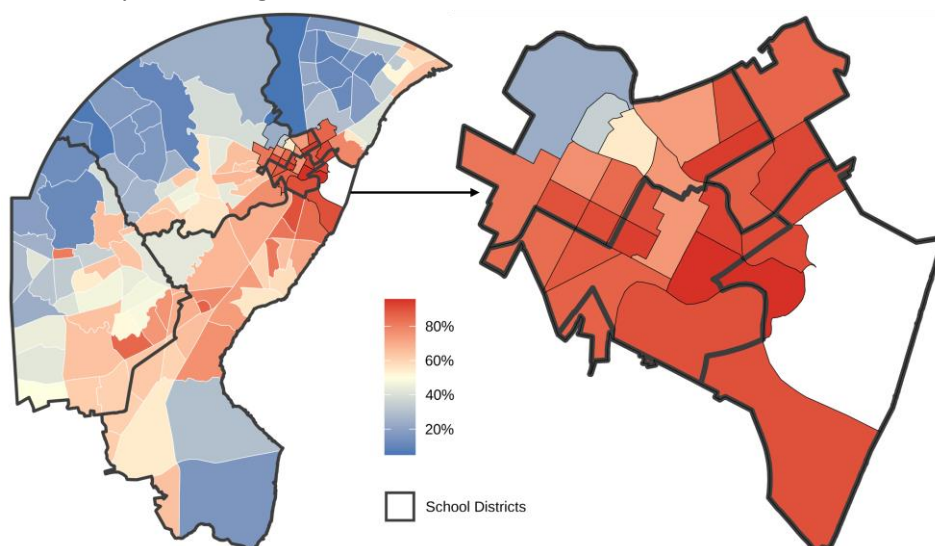
The neighborhood differences in long-term economic outcomes for the generation who came of age in the early days of compulsory busing and the four-district school system are mirrored in demographic and academic outcome trends today. Figures 12 and 13 depict where students experiencing poverty and African American and Hispanic/Latino students live across northern New Castle County and the city of Wilmington. Note that racial residence patterns more closely mirror the long-term economic outcomes described on the previous page.

Figure 12: Percentage of Students from Low-Income Families in Northern New Castle County and the City of Wilmington (Note: These data are self-reported during school registration and so are often under reported)



Source: Delaware Department of Education Technology & Data Office

Figure 13: Percentage of African American and Hispanic/Latino Students in northern New Castle County and the City of Wilmington



Source: Delaware Department of Education Technology & Data Office

Overview: Current Demographic and Academic Trends

The connection between a student's race or economic background and their academic opportunities is a persistent challenge in northern New Castle County and Wilmington.

In Delaware's school accountability system, students who score a 1 or 2 on state assessments are performing below grade average.¹ When we analyze the combined math (Figure 14) and language arts (Figure 15) scores of 3rd, 8th, and 11th graders in northern New Castle County and the city of Wilmington, we see that the patterns of academic opportunities and success correlate with racial demographics and long-term economic outcomes for the students in Wilmington.

Figure 14: Percentage of 3rd, 8th, and 11th Grade Students Scoring 1 or 2 in Math (2024)

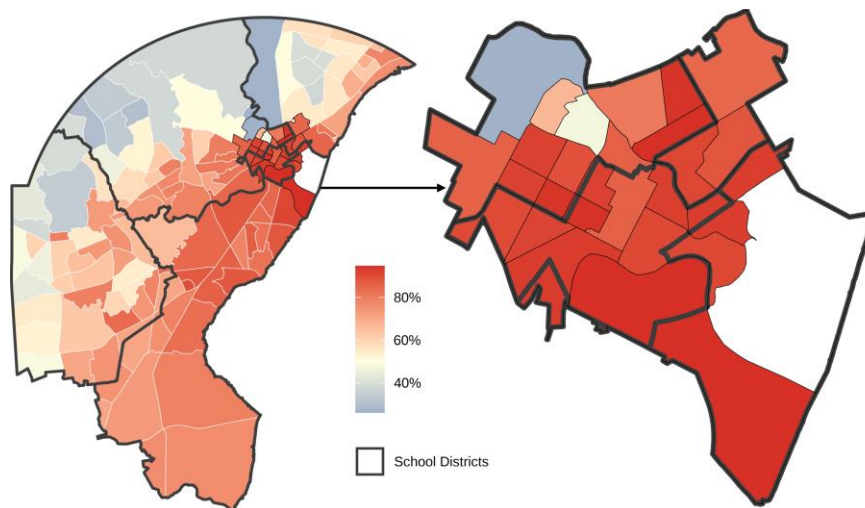
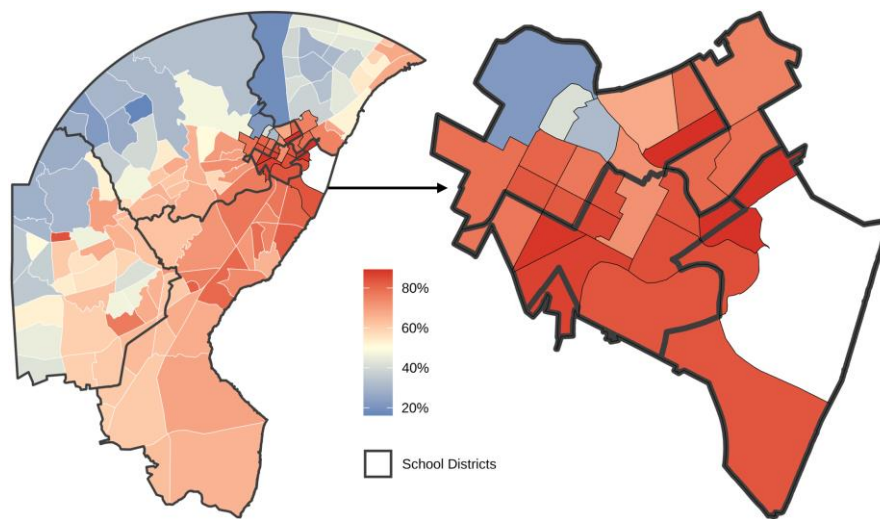


Figure 15: Percentage of 3rd, 8th, and 11th Grade Students Scoring 1 or 2 in Language Arts (2024)



¹ We describe the distribution of scores of 1s and 2s in these maps. While scores of 1 are solidly below grade level on the 3rd and 8th grade assessments and 11th grade SAT, scores of 2 may include students who came close to mastering the subject but did not fully reach the grade-level proficiency score of 3.

Overview: School Choice

Today, Delaware's school choice policy is one of the current structural strategies for improving educational opportunities for students in Wilmington. This policy allows families to apply to any public school in the state, regardless of their home address.

“ I haven't seen a choice family that wasn't able to utilize their choice award ... But I've seen some struggles with some of the lower-income families.

-School Staff ”

The pattern of school choice varies, depending on the school district and where a student lives. For example, Table 1 shows that a significantly higher percentage of students assigned to Brandywine or Red Clay schools are remaining in district compared to students assigned to Christina or Colonial (see highlighted boxes for the percentage of students who remained in assigned districts).

Table 1: City of Wilmington Student Enrollment by District of Residence (2024–2025 School Year)

	Students Assigned District							
	Brandywine		Christina		Colonial		Red Clay	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Brandywine	1,502	72%	190	4%	19	6%	229	6%
Christina	29	1%	1,803	41%	0	0%	101	2%
Colonial	18	1%	81	2%	131	45%	43	1%
Red Clay	69	3%	484	11%	10	3%	2,714	65%
New Castle Voc	129	7%	370	8%	8	3%	271	6%
Charter	321	16%	1,463	33%	125	43%	843	20%
Another District	7	0%	16	1%	1	0%	9	0%
TOTAL	2,075	100%	4,047	100%	294	100%	4,210	100%

Source: Delaware Department of Education Technology & Data Office

Note: These enrollment percentages include all grade levels; however, enrollment varies by grade-level especially for high school students.

School choice patterns also vary within districts. In every district, students not accessing the school choice system and attending their assigned schools are disproportionately students experiencing poverty, students with disabilities, and African American students (see Table 2).

Table 2: Student Enrollment in the 2024–2025 School Year

	Brandywine		Christina		Colonial		Red Clay	
	Total District	Attending Assigned School	Total District	Attending Assigned School	Total District	Attending Assigned School	Total District	Attending Assigned School
Low-Income	26%	54%	32%	63%	32%	84%	30%	60%
Students With Disabilities	19%	27%	20%	25%	20%	28%	19%	26%
Black/African American	37%	82%	40%	71%	45%	82%	25%	66%
Hispanic	9%	7%	22%	19%	23%	7%	29%	24%

Source: Delaware Department of Education Technology & Data Office

Overview: Navigating School Choice and the Four-District System

The Redding Consortium's redistricting plan is explicitly focused on addressing disparities in access to wraparound resources and educational opportunities by reducing fragmentation and creating a more streamlined experience for Wilmington students and families.

“ Now you have a bigger population of students who have bigger dreams ... or don't even know the options for college or after high school. ”

- High School Student

The move to streamline district operations and communications is strongly supported by our discussions with students, school staff, and community providers, who consistently emphasized the need for clearer pathways and supports for students and more comprehensive and effective teamwork between schools and community partners.

Some students and parents described having a clear vision for life after high school, knowing where to find support, and how to navigate the system to access high-quality schools and programs.

In contrast, other students and parents, particularly those facing greater challenges, shared that they and their friends or neighbors find the system confusing and overwhelming. Some described needing more information and support to make informed choices and create a clear roadmap for the students' future.

“ But some kids it's just like, 'Okay, this is how my family came up so this is how I'm going to end up and it's going to stay like that and it's just going to go for generations.' ”

-High School Student

Some students believe that their peers have a sense of limited options; that they see the challenges their parents face and believe that this is their only possible path. Students noted a desire for more real-world learning and vocational opportunities that teach practical skills, in addition to purely college-focused tracks.

These findings are somewhat surprising, given the significant investment the state has made in programs and supports for creating clear postsecondary pathways. These challenges highlight that while valuable and relevant supports may be available, their accessibility varies across different communities, which are served by varying combinations of schools, school-based providers, and community-based organizations.

Overview: Navigating School Choice and the Four-District System

Wilmington's current school system also creates obstacles for schools, school-based service providers, and community-based organizations to maintain a consistent and continuous level of support and care—especially for students who move across schools and districts.

When students transfer to a new school and district, they face a different curriculum and learning pace. This lack of a shared curriculum makes it difficult for school staff to ensure a smooth transition and provide students with appropriate support.

“ And when I see kids moving around, I always wonder about the gaps. If you left off here in the curriculum, where are you going to be when you go to the next school?... So what happens with those gaps? Will there be gaps? And how will a kid make up the gaps? ”

-School Staff

Some organizations work across districts to provide support; however, service providers and community-based organizations must also navigate multiple, different district administrations. Providers noted that because of these differences, their services might not be structured, funded, or integrated the same way everywhere.

“ We opened up and provided services to kids from 17 different schools in six different school districts. We can't get any coordination of transportation or services, it's a nightmare. ”

- Community-Based Organization Staff

While the four-district system clearly presents a challenge for many students, families, and providers, no student is bound to a specific district. Since 2013, Delaware's school choice policy allows families to apply to any public school in the state, ostensibly offering them more options. We discuss the choice process in more detail next.

Overview: Key Social Drivers Impacting Health and Education

While looking at the past and present trends in Wilmington, it's easy to feel overwhelmed and believe that these patterns are too big to change.

However, by listening to the real-life experiences of children and families, it is clear that coherent and effective wraparound services should be included in the redistricting plan and will make a difference.

This is based on findings from a series of surveys, interviews, and focus groups with students, parents, and staff from schools and community organizations.

The Youth Research Team surveys involved 69 students and parents. The initial survey focused on understanding the most crucial social drivers, and a second survey explored student mental health with students from 12 area high schools.

AIR conducted interviews and focus groups with 116 students, parents and guardians, and school and community staff across the city of Wilmington. Participants were prioritized based on either living in, attending school in, or providing services in neighborhoods most impacted by negative social drivers, based on data from the American Communities Survey, Centers for Disease Control, and interviews with local leaders.

Figure 16 below compares the social drivers that surfaced in the Youth Researcher surveys with how frequently certain social drivers were mentioned in interviews and focus groups.

“Without stable housing, that means that kids don’t have a place to put their stuff. They have to get up early, or they’re getting in late at night ... so they’re tired when they go to school. They’re eating as they go; they’re not necessarily having meals, you know what I mean? ... for the child and the parent, it affects their mental health.”

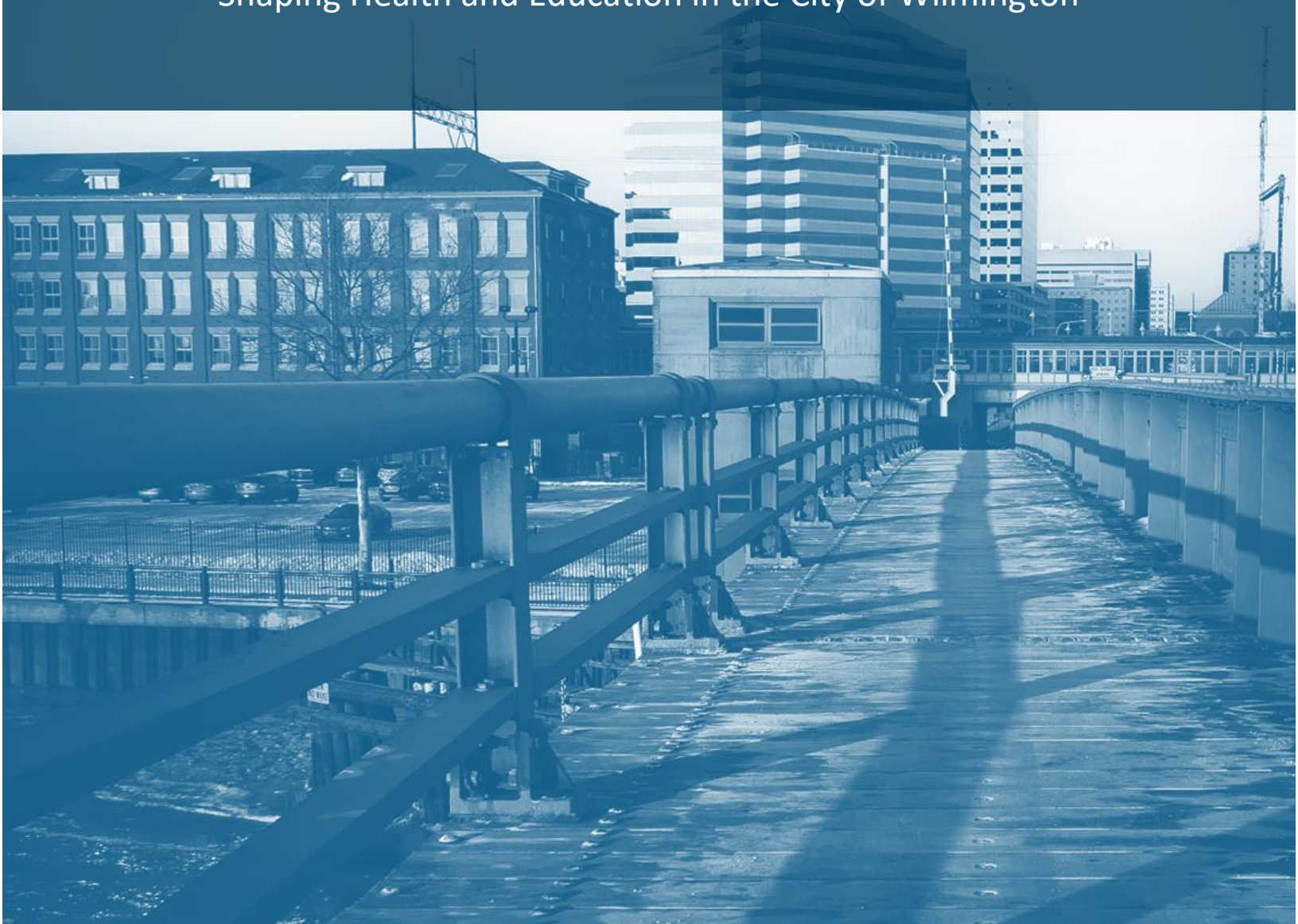
– School Staff

Figure 16: Comparison of Priority Social Drivers

Priorities from Youth Research Survey	Social Drivers	Priorities from Interviews & Focus Groups	The following sections explore four key social drivers that emerged as priorities from our research: public safety, mental health, housing, and transportation. We also highlight a few cross-cutting issues that surfaced often but were symptoms of social drivers rather than social drivers themselves. These include chronic absenteeism, student mobility, and after-school programs. It's crucial to stress that these social factors don't operate in isolation but are interconnected and reinforce one another. By providing a more precise picture of how these social drivers combine in residents' lives, we can support a redistricting plan that is transformative regardless of where students live, what district they are assigned to, or what school they attend.
1st	Mental Health	3rd	
2nd	Public Safety	1st	
3rd	Housing	4th	
4th	Transportation	2nd	
N/A	Jobs	5th	
N/A	Food Access	6th	

Exploring the Key Social Drivers

A Deeper Examination of Four Key Social Drivers
Shaping Health and Education in the City of Wilmington



Key Social Driver: Public Safety

Students are avoiding school options, parks, public transportation, and community centers due to fear for their safety.



Public safety has a direct and significant impact on students' health and educational outcomes. Exposure to violence creates a “toxic stress” response in a student's brain, which turns into lower test scores, higher rates of absenteeism, and a reduced likelihood of high school graduation (Cohen et al., 2009).

When students don't feel safe in their neighborhood, they tend to stay away from public places, which negatively affects their physical and mental health (Borofsky et al., 2013).



Public safety concerns in Wilmington neighborhoods and schools limit students' and families' access to public spaces and after-school programs. Parents' feelings of vulnerability have an impact on their willingness to allow their children to play outside or participate in extracurricular activities.



Transportation safety is a concern for Wilmington students, as unsafe walking routes and negative experiences on public transit impacts their willingness to attend certain schools, hang out in certain parks, or join extracurriculars. This is an even more pressing issue for young women, who report feelings of vulnerability to harassment while commuting, leading them to use rideshare services as an alternative.



Longstanding community divisions between adults and youth in different neighborhoods are limiting students' health and education opportunities. Community tensions spill into classrooms and community centers, influence what schools students choose, limit where they can safely participate in after school activities and extracurriculars and constrain options for where they can safely spend time with friends outside of school.

Public Safety

Public safety emerged as the most interconnected social driver in this study. Discussions of fear or social isolation due to community violence were never discussed in isolation and were almost always entangled with issues related to mental health, school choice, after-school participation, and transportation. While community violence has been rigorously and thoroughly documented for more than a decade (see call-out on page 20), our research provides a unique, on-the-ground perspective from parents and students about exactly how exposure to community violence is directly impacting their health and educational opportunities.



46%
**of respondents note
School/Neighborhood
safety as one of the
drivers affecting
education and learning.**

“ **It’s the area where I live that prevents me from letting them go outside because it’s dangerous ... there’s no nearby park ... so I just don’t take them out.** ”

- Parent

Numerous students and parents shared that safety concerns in their neighborhoods are causing them to keep indoors and avoid walking in the neighborhood and visiting local parks and public spaces. Some parents and students shared that this lack of access to safe public spaces has an impact on the mental health of both parents and children.

In many cases, the fear of being in public spaces was due to direct exposure to community violence and especially gun violence. As one student described:

“ **Now over there, the kids can’t come outside no more. One day I said, ‘I never see your siblings outside no more.’ And she said, ‘Yeah, [my friend’s] brother got shot right on the corner right there, so they’re not allowed to come outside no more.’** ”

- Student

Exposure to violence and concerns about safety also impact students’ ability to access public transportation and extracurricular activities that are essential for their social and academic development. Some students expressed frustration about missing out on these valuable opportunities because of safety concerns. One student noted:

“ **My mom used to have to pick me up after school and I do sports and for a while we had struggled to find me a bus stop for me to go on for that school bus because my mom doesn’t want me in certain areas because it’s dangerous.** ”

- Student

Public Safety

The **Youth Research Team from the Center for Structural Equity** created specific examples of how considerations of public safety factor into their own lives and movement around the city. Through a series of photographs and short narratives (a participatory action research method called Photovoice), they captured the community assets that support their health and education and liabilities that present challenges. Their work clearly shows the linkages between public safety and accessing public spaces and after-school activities.



The team **highlighted community assets** like the “Blue Bus” (pictured left) offering safe transportation to after-school programs, safe public spaces like the Chancery (pictured right), and new schools and community centers.



The team also **highlighted community liabilities** across the city like unsafe businesses and bus stops, and dangerous roadways like Pine Street (pictured left) and the intersection of 10th and Spruce (pictured right) that are high-traffic areas for drugs, shootings, and community violence.

The work of the Youth Research Team provides a type of on-the-ground insight that is crucial for effective policymaking and cannot be gathered through traditional methods. This work not only provides invaluable information but also offers students real-world skill-building opportunities and gives them a very concrete role in helping to shape the conditions of their own environment.

Public Safety

The safety of the “Blue Bus” pictured in the Youth Research Team photos on the previous page contrasts with the experiences of numerous female students we spoke to who described their cumulative trauma from regular public harassment, especially when commuting to school or after-school activities. They described a difficult conflict between their need and desire to move about the city independently and their fear of doing so. For example, one student shared:

“Being harassed ... I don't know if I can even speak for you young males, but the harassment as a young lady in the community is just so bad.”
- Female Student

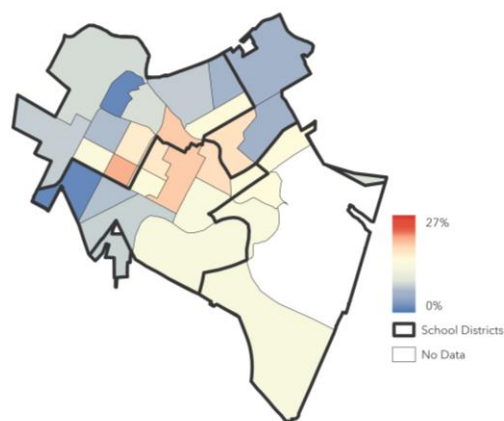
Another female student shared about a recent experience trying to catch her school bus.

“I was walking to my bus stop...when two white men opened the back of their van and asked me to help them lift something out. I said no, and they proceeded to chase after me.”
- Female Student

Some parents and students noted a strong connection between public safety and areas with larger than average concentrations of vacant and abandoned homes. Figure 17 depicts the census tracts with the largest percentages of vacant homes within Wilmington.

“Riverside, I avoid that at all costs...Everybody there is crazy. Most of them houses is boarded up because nobody lives there.”
- Student

Figure 17: Percentage of Vacant Homes (2022–2024)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates, 2019–2023, Table DP04: Selected Housing Characteristics.

This issue of vacant housing highlights a complex local challenge: There are significant investments to improve conditions of housing and public spaces in the areas where vacant housing is most concentrated. But these efforts are also creating housing affordability challenges, which we discuss later in the report.

Public Safety

A common theme throughout our conversations with both students and adults was the existence of long-standing conflicts between young people from different neighborhoods within Wilmington.

“ They're pulling people from different neighborhoods. They've got some Riverside kids, some Northside kids, and these days, people beef with each other for no reason.”

- Parent

Some students described living in an almost constant state of fear of losing their lives. They explained that there are youth and adults who actively hunt those from rival neighborhoods, and that navigating schools, streets, and parks requires rigorous attention to one's surroundings and a plan of escape.

In the past, these social dynamics were not considered when schools were filled with students from different neighborhoods, which at times led to predictable violence. Today, these issues have resulted in suspending traditional school experiences like Friday night football, which were once spaces for community and healthy competition. Students and teachers noted that these tensions have been made worse by social media and having school faculty and administration who were not from the area and were unprepared to manage these conflicts effectively.

“ The neighborhoods would've never been put together ... the dynamic and the environment is just different. And at that time ... it was all new staff, all new administration who had never worked together ... a lot of staff turnover as well. So, it just wasn't the best idea for our children.”

- Parent

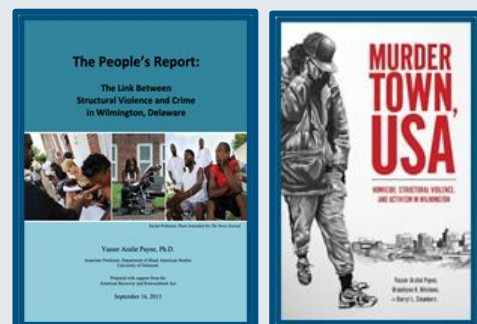
Ongoing conflicts between young people from different neighborhoods highlight a paradox: the longstanding conflicts create a culture where youth don't feel safe accessing community centers and after-school programs, but there are now fewer community centers and programs that create safe, neutral spaces for youth to get to know one another, compete against one another, and build friendships.

Further Reading

For a more complete history and examination of longstanding community violence and community-based advocacy in Wilmington, read:

[The People's Report \(2013\)](#)

[Murder Town, USA \(2023\)](#)



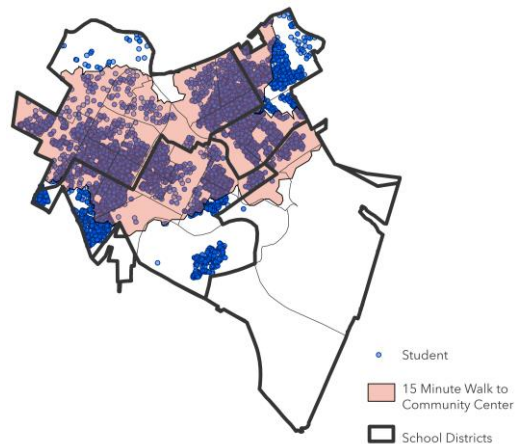
Spotlight on Cross-Cutting Issues: After-School Programs

Wilmington students and families face significant challenges to accessing after-school and summer programs for their children, including high costs, lack of safe transportation, and a reduced number of programs.

The research on after-school programs is clear. They provide crucial academic support and also serve as "safe havens" for children and adolescents during peak hours for risky behavior between 3 and 6 PM but are too often inaccessible for low-income households (Aazami et al., 2023; Afterschool Alliance, 2020).

Figure 18 shows that most neighborhoods are within a 15-minute walk of a community center except for Southbridge, Browntown, North West, Harlan Park, Brandywine Hills, and some of East Side. While some programs are nearby, students and parents described not being able to access programs due to high costs, misalignment with school schedules, safety concerns, and a lack of childcare and safe and reliable transportation. Therefore, efforts to increase the supply of programs in underserved neighborhoods must be combined with steps to address the other social drivers that limit access.

Figure 18: Distance to Community Centers for Students



Source: Community Asset Dataset, AIR and the University of Delaware Institute for Public Administration, and Student Enrollment, Delaware Department of Education Technology & Data Office



Key Social Driver: Mental Health

Mental health surfaced as a significant and growing issue for Wilmington students and parents. Many schools and community organizations offer resources, but their inconsistent utilization and accessibility remain significant barriers to support.



Students' struggles with mental health can lead to chronic absenteeism and poor academic performance. A study found that students with a mental health condition had worse attendance than those without, with secondary school students missing an average of 12 to 26 more days per year (Berg & Seaton, 2019).

Beyond attendance, mental health challenges show a clear link between depression and lower GPAs, with this connection becoming even stronger when anxiety is also a factor (Eisenberg et al., 2009).



Although many schools and community organizations offer mental health resources, it remains a pressing issue for Wilmington students and parents. School-based services are often either under-staffed, with counselors spending less time on developing relationships and providing trauma-informed care.



Stigma about mental health, high costs, lack of trust between students and adults, and limited awareness of services are key barriers preventing students from accessing mental health support, despite available resources. These challenges contribute to increased dropout rates, chronic absenteeism, and academic disengagement.



A variety of other social drivers (e.g., safety and technology) are leading many students to engage less with the world outside their homes. This isolation contributes to heightened fear, anxiety, and social challenges among youth, while parents express feeling helpless to monitor their children due to economic pressures.

While a full examination of mental health was beyond the scope of this study (e.g., examining types of mental health challenges, how they are measured, and gaps in services), the issue surfaced so frequently that it would be irresponsible not to share student and parent experiences, as we do on the following pages.

Mental Health

Mental health emerged as a priority social driver in this study, with over 60% of students and parents in our surveys citing it as a major concern. The issue was also frequently discussed in interviews, with mental health challenges mentioned 57 times by the 116 people who participated.

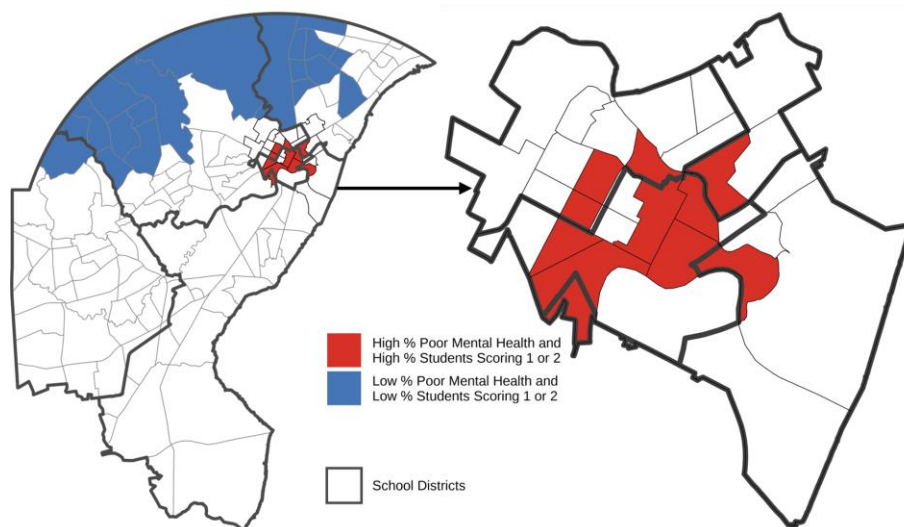


60%
of respondents note
mental health as one of
the drivers affecting
education and learning.

While mental health challenges are a significant finding in our study, we recognize they are often a symptom of other underlying life circumstances. For example, stories about depression or trauma were almost always bundled with issues surrounding economic stress, housing instability, and community violence.

For students, the need to address the complex circumstances of mental health is urgent, as it has a clear linkage with learning and life outcomes. As we see in Figure 19 below, the negative correlations between mental health and educational opportunity are not evenly distributed. The areas in red below indicate the specific neighborhoods where self-reported poor mental health most strongly relates to reading and writing under grade-level amongst 3rd, 8th, and 11th graders.

Figure 19: Clusters of Poor Mental Health and Students Scoring 1 or 2 in Language Arts



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention PLACES: Local Data for Better Health, and Delaware Department of Education Technology & Data Office

Mental Health

In developing a comprehensive wraparound strategy for the redistricting plan, it's clear that many mental health resources are available for students and families; however, a major challenge is awareness. Some community members don't know where to get help or how to access the services they need. One school staff member observed:

“ The resources are available. I think the challenge might be is if the students are not accessing their resources. If they are not accessing the counselors because of whatever reason that might be. ”

- School Staff

This suggestion of gaps in student awareness is supported by findings from the Youth Research Team Mental Health survey that found that 56% of respondents felt there were no mental health supports for youth or weren't sure if there was support available. This statement also reflects that in some cases school personnel are also not aware of why students are not accessing services.

Some staff who work with students and families have a different perspective on resource access. They feel the system is strained, with those who do seek free resources often facing long wait times. This suggests that the available support simply can't keep up with the demand in some places.

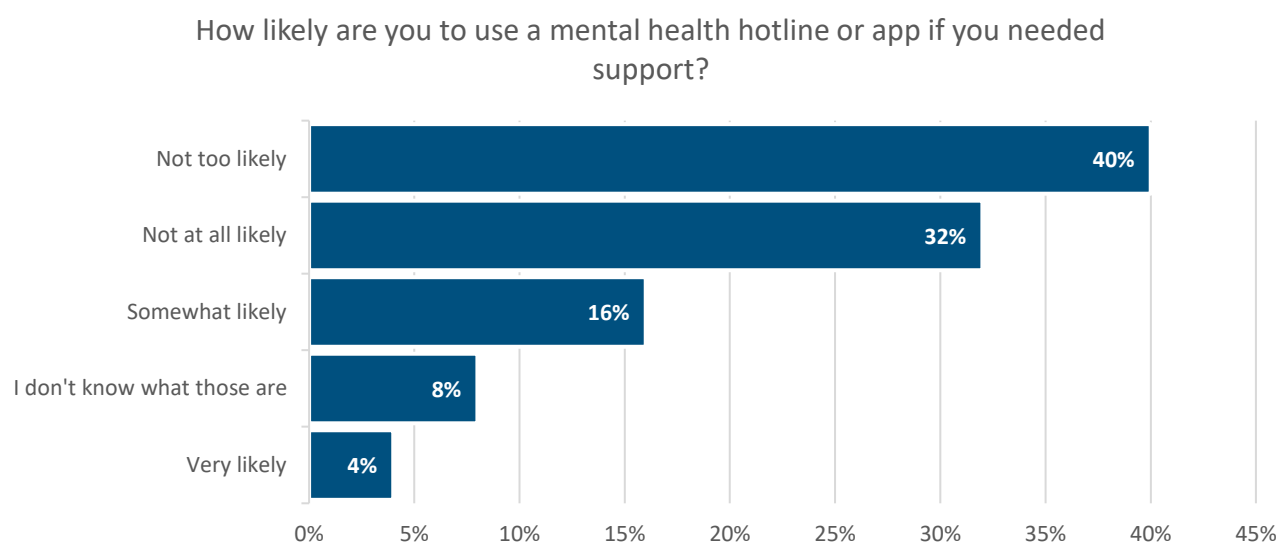
“ If I have an issue, and now you're telling me I got to wait two weeks to talk to a counselor? We got a wellness center and you don't got an appointment until next Thursday? But I need you now. ”

- School Staff

Several school and community-based staff noted that one way students can access mental health services or schedule a time with their counselor is through a web-based application. Figure 20 on the next page shows a summary from a related question on the Youth Research Mental Health Survey. As you can see, only 20% of respondents were very or somewhat likely to use a hotline or a web-based app to seek help.

Mental Health

Figure 20: Results from Youth Mental Health Survey



School personnel and students suggest that one of the reasons some students still resist seeking mental health supports is due to longstanding stigmas about mental health in the community. One educator observed:

“ I know some families are like, ‘You don't say anything. This is family business.’ ”
- School Staff

Indeed, when asked who they would go to for a mental health issue, the youth survey revealed that **64%** would turn to friends and family, and a concerning **24%** would turn to no one at all.

When students are willing to reach out for support, school leaders and staff note that it is critical for counselors to have the bandwidth to provide the types of trauma-informed care that many students need. Educators noted the need for lower student-to-counselor ratios and supports for school-based professionals who in many cases need mental health supports themselves.

While students may not always report that they are struggling with mental health, other signs often indicate that they are wrestling with these challenges. Oftentimes, struggles with mental health led to chronic absenteeism and, in turn, drops in academic performance. Mental health worsens from getting behind in school, and it is challenging for school personnel to help address the issue if students aren't there.

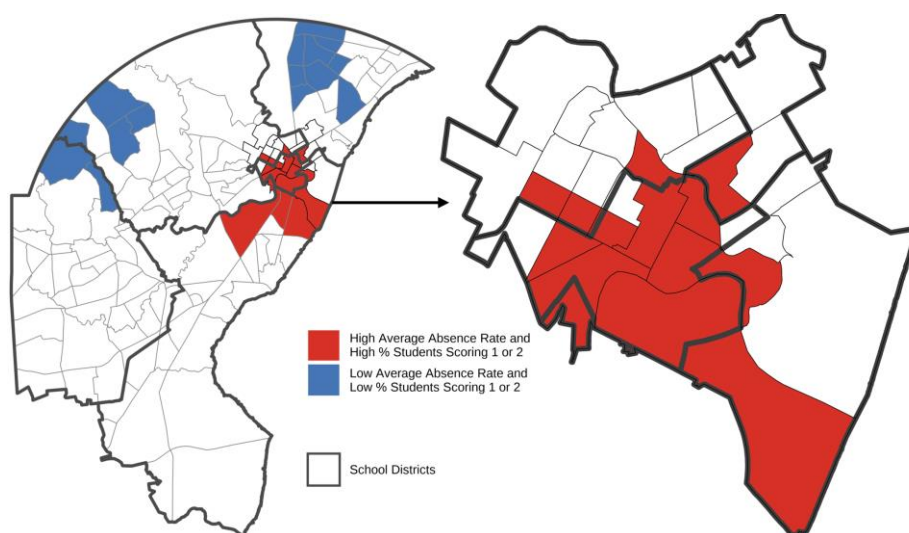
Spotlight on Cross-Cutting Topics: Chronic Absenteeism

Across this study, a recurring theme was the direct link between various social drivers and students missing school. This issue frequently came in the context of conversations about public safety, housing instability, and access to transportation.

Chronic absenteeism, defined as missing 10% or more of school days for any reason, is a strong predictor of poor educational outcomes. Students who are chronically absent in kindergarten and first grade are strongly associated with lower academic performance across reading and math by first grade. This is especially true for students living in poverty where chronic absenteeism is strongly associated with low academic performance in fifth grade (Chang and Romero, 2008)

In the city of Wilmington, the clusters of students experiencing high absentee rates and low educational opportunity fall into a similar cluster of inner-city neighborhoods that have been highlighted throughout this report (see Figure 21). Importantly, these clusters of students cross all four district lines, so the systems of intervention and support may vary.

Figure 21: Clusters of Average Absence Rate and Students Scoring 1 or 2 in Language Arts



Source: Delaware Department of Education Technology & Data Office

Key Social Driver: Housing Instability

A growing number of lower-income families in Wilmington are experiencing housing instability. The resulting housing and school moves are disrupting students' education by interrupting their academic progress and relationships with peers, teachers, and service providers.



Housing vulnerability, which includes homelessness, frequent moves, being cost-burdened, and living in substandard conditions, is a critical social driver of health and education (Frederick et al., 2014).

A lack of stable and safe housing can lead to stress, health issues from poor living conditions, and constant disruption to a student's academic life due to frequent school changes (Brennan et al., 2014; Galvez & Luna, 2014).



Increased market values and shortages in affordable rental units are forcing lower-income families to move. While many agree that the improvements are beneficial, the disruptions and instability are compromising some students' education and well-being. Local rental property owners are well-positioned to be thought partners in shaping affordable housing solutions.



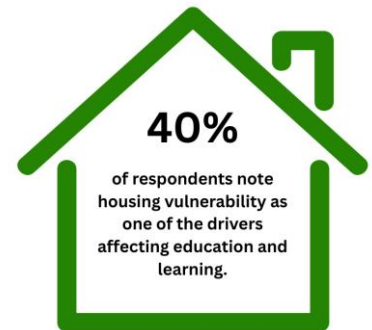
When dealing with landlords, many families are not fully aware of their rights as tenants or the formalities of a lease. This lack of knowledge can leave them vulnerable, making it harder to protect themselves from the start and navigate transitions if a move is required.



Multiple schools and organizations provide resources and support, such as housing assistance, rent vouchers, and transportation, to help families facing housing instability. However, the demand for these supports often outweighs supply, access can be inconsistent, and policies can be frustrating for families seeking stability.

Housing Instability

Housing instability surfaced as the most critical social driver during the early phases of this landscape analysis, according to local leaders and school and community provider staff. Our subsequent interviews, focus groups, and Youth Research Team surveys confirmed that affordable housing is a foundational social driver because it provides more than just a safe and stable place for families to live, it also significantly reduces the number of times students are forced to change schools. This stability is crucial for both their health and their education.



“We've had kids move two or three times in a school year, right? So that is an issue. Stable, stable, affordable housing.”

- School Staff

When neighborhoods that have experienced long-term disinvestment see renewed economic interest, we often face a complex challenge. While the goal is to improve the area for everyone, a frequent and unintended consequence is the displacement of long-term residents. A common perception amongst parents, staff, and community leaders that we spoke to is that downtown development incentives—which were also very often perceived favorably—are also acting as a social driver and pricing out longtime residents. Interviewees noted the differences between external real estate development and small, local rental property owners whom they viewed as a potential ally in developing local solutions.

“The Northeast part of Wilmington, East side, on balance, it's still very Wilmington, but there is also some, quite frankly housing development efforts- that look great, by the way— that I believe are forcing people to the county.”

- Local Leader

Some school personnel shared that they have seen a connection between real estate and community development and increases in student mobility. This highlights a tension as many community development groups also play key roles in mobilizing efforts for safer streets, green spaces for children to play, and better access to wraparound services.

“We lost a lot of those students as well...In helping East Side to rise, it has eliminated housing for some of our families where this was their home.”

- School Staff

Some interview participants explained that it's not enough to simply blame new development. The core question for city and Redding Consortium leadership is how to attract the investment that is required to fund better schools, safer streets, and new economic opportunities without pushing out those who are the bedrock of the community.

Housing Instability

During conversations about how property values have risen, we heard from many parents that they are facing unexpected moves from their rental homes. This type of unexpected move is a significant source of instability for families. Figures 22 and 23 below show the neighborhood-level patterns of student movement and rental evictions. Evictions correlate with student mobility most strongly in downtown and Midtown Brandywine, which have relatively small student populations. We explore broader student mobility patterns in more depth in the following cross-cutting issue spotlight.

“I'm moving out this week because our landlord randomly decided to sell our house. And so that's another thing. They're selling all houses. Everybody has to move out, find somewhere else to live and it is a real hassle.”

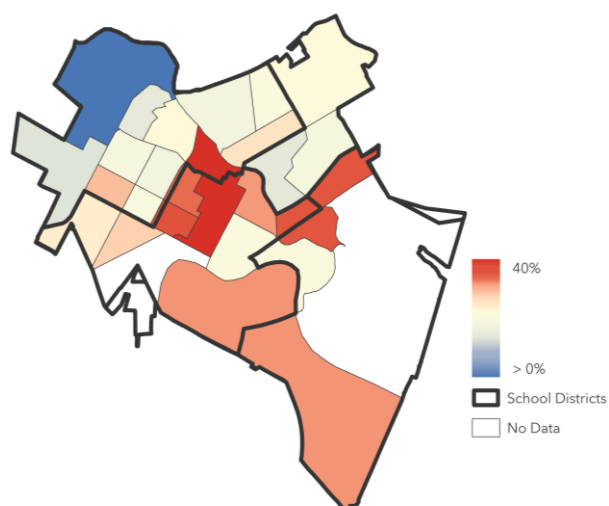
- Parent

Staff in schools and community organizations noted that many families who are now facing unexpected moves are doing so because they are unaware of their rights as renters. This lack of knowledge makes it difficult for them to protect themselves from future housing instability.

“They've come into situations where they're renting, they haven't done the proper legal process to rent, they don't know there's a process when they're going to be displaced or not...They don't know the process to rent properly where you're secure for a certain amount of time and you cannot be displaced because you have children.”

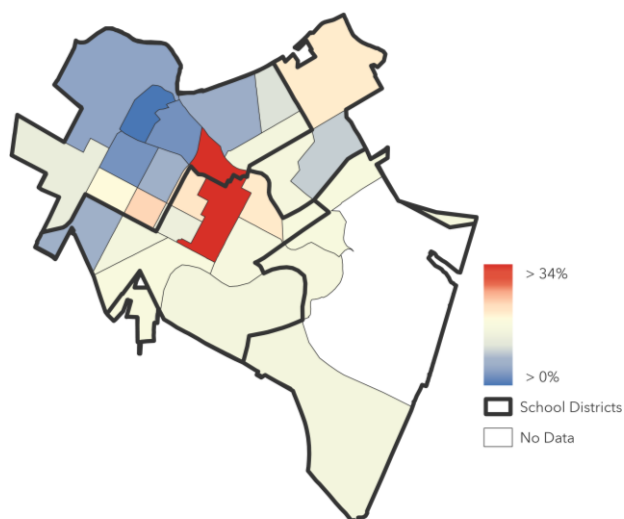
- Community Provider

Figure 22: Percentage of Wilmington Students Who Changed Schools (2022–2024)



Source: Delaware Department of Education Technology & Data Office

Figure 23: Percentage of Rentals with Eviction Filings Since September 2024



Source: Princeton University Eviction Lab

Housing Instability

Public housing was regularly mentioned as a critical and transformative source of support for many families in Wilmington.

For many of the parents we spoke to, it has been a life-changer, providing a much-needed foundation of stability during times of great hardship.

A primary challenge, however, is that there is a lack of emergency housing options and many families face years of instability before they are able to secure this vital support. Interviewees noted that these issues are further exacerbated by local geopolitical fragmentation which inhibits the city's ability to mobilize coordinated emergency housing responses.

For those who are able to secure public housing, some residents face a new set of challenges with policies that tie their rent to their earnings. While public housing provides crucial stability for families to get back on their feet financially, the system can create a disincentive for them to earn more.

As their income rises, their housing assistance decreases, and their rent increases. This often leaves parents with very little financial gain after accounting for new work-related expenses like transportation and childcare. As one parent noted:

“ I have five children. I live in a three-bedroom apartment ... I was making more money but by the time the voucher came through they were like, "Oh, your rent is going to be \$0." I didn't want to be dishonest because I didn't want to be ... reporting that I'm making more money now. So I did that, and they told me [they] would only cover \$400 towards rent. And if you think about it, a three bedroom or four-bedroom townhouse, it's \$2,500 ... It just doesn't make sense. - Parent ”

These thin margins force parents to make a difficult choice: they must either get another job just to cover the added expenses or consider earning less to keep their housing affordable. This can discourage them from seeking better-paying jobs if it means having less time with their family. Choosing time with family often requires student mobility, which can have a devastating effect on students' academic progress and relationships.

Spotlight on Cross-Cutting Topic: Student Mobility

A key theme from interviews and focus groups was that rising levels of student mobility—movement from one school to another—is negatively impacting a growing number of students in Wilmington.

Research consistently shows a negative impact from student mobility on both a student's academic and health outcomes. This is because frequent school changes disrupt a child's learning environment and social support system.

We reviewed the student mobility patterns for all the students who lived in the Wilmington city limits from 2022 and tracked their movements through 2024. We only focused on off-schedule transitions. In other words, natural transitions from elementary to middle, or middle to high were not included as school changes. Table 3 below summarizes a number of key takeaways.

Table 3: Student Mobility Statistics for Students in the City of Wilmington (2022–2024)

How many students changed schools?	1,832 (21% of total) changed schools.
How many changes?	The 1,832 students collectively changed schools 2,685 times.
How many times did they change?	1,212 (66% of movers) only changed school one time.
	424 (23% of movers) changed schools two times.
	196 (11% of movers) changed schools three or more times.
When did the changes happen?	1,461 (54%) of the moves happened at the end of the school year.
	1,224 (46%) of the moves happened during the year.
How did the moves impact academics?	Average math and English language arts scores both drop significantly the more moves a student makes.
Where were students moving to?	68% (1,818) moved from one traditional public school to another.
	17% (454) moved from traditional schools to charters.
	11% (288) moved from charters to traditional schools.
	5% (125) moved from charters to another charter.

Source: Delaware Department of Education Technology & Data Office

Student mobility is influenced by factors related to a family's stability. While a student may change schools for reasons related to dissatisfaction with the school itself, the common drivers are often rooted in a family's life circumstances. These life circumstances can be made more difficult by gaps in safe and reliable transportation, which we explore in the next section.

Key Social Driver: Transportation

Transportation availability and safety and dangerous pathways for pedestrians create systemic barriers for some Wilmington students to access educational opportunities, attend school regularly, and participate in extracurriculars.



Reliable and safe transportation is an essential social driver for students' education and health. Gaps in transportation access are a major cause of chronic absenteeism and tardiness (Sanderson Edwards, 2024).

Beyond attendance, long commutes reduce time available for sleep, studying, and physical activity, which directly impacts academic performance and cognitive function (Jamil et al., 2022; Voulgaris et al., 2019). For students in unsafe neighborhoods, walking or using public transit leads to increased stress and anxiety that can negatively affect their attachment to school (Milam et al., 2010).



Some community organizations and schools provide targeted transportation support for students and families who need it, but there is a need for more systemic transportation options. The four-district system and school start times exacerbate the challenge; community programs must work around the complex transportation schedules of students and families.



For low-income families who do not have their own means of transportation, the school choice policy prevents them from considering options beyond their assigned schools. In the school choice program, families are responsible for getting their children to the school or nearest bus stop. Families with multiple children face the complex challenge of coordinating transportation across different districts and often avoid public transit due to safety concerns.

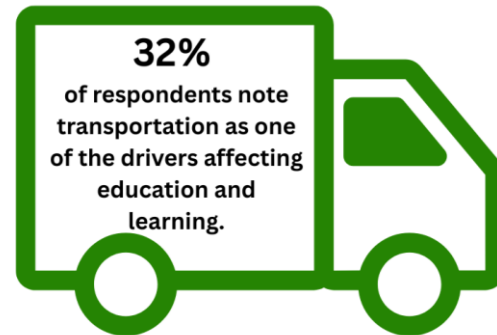


For families who live outside the one (elementary) or two (middle and high) mile radius from their school, safe walking routes are essential. A lack of safe walking routes, combined with diverse family circumstances, can increase a child's school absences.

Transportation

When we refer to safe transportation, we mean an environment that provides unimpeded access to and from schools, after-school programs, and public spaces. This includes not only free public transportation but also secure pathways for walking and biking.

Our interviews and focus groups and Youth Research Team surveys highlighted that there is currently a lack of accessible, safe transportation, which is having a ripple effect on some students' ability to participate fully in their school and community.



For some students, concerns about safety on public transportation limit their involvement in extracurricular activities and after-school programs. These issues are especially challenging for younger students who have fewer options for independently accessing alternate transportation options. Extracurricular and after school programs are essential for student engagement, skill development, and creating a positive school culture.

“ I'm young, and the guys on the bus, crack heads too, just won't stop. They won't give up. And it's like, I don't even want to get on the bus anymore because this is what I got to go through. ”

- Student

Numerous community-based organizations and after-school providers offer transportation or transportation support. However, staff noted that their resources are limited and the supports they can provide is not sufficient to address persistent gaps in transportation.

“ We have bus passes here that we give out for free. But we are limited with what we can give out. We can't give you a year's worth of bus pass to get back and forth to work or six months or anything like that. It's just kind of fly the seat. 'Okay, you have to work this week? Let's give you a week bus pass.' But then now what happens next? ”

- Provider

Transportation

Several providers mentioned that they often struggle to provide consistent services when they have to contend with the logistical challenges of multiple school districts and student and family schedules. Regarding coordinating with high school students across the area, one provider noted:

“ It takes you an hour already just to get from school to home. And then, imagine how long it takes to get from home over to ... do your internship and to learn about skills, professional skills and development ... it makes it very, very tough to expand our programs in a very vast way, because we keep coming against these certain factors and barriers that just limit that opportunity.”

- Provider

Beyond accessing after-school programs, transportation access is also a matter of equity when it comes to school choice. As one educator observed:

“ There are some families who are choosing school choice because of the programs and opportunities at different schools. And if you cannot safely get your child to school on time regularly, you will lose that choice.”

- School Staff

Interviews and focus groups with students, parents, and staff highlight the potential of redistricting and a more unified, coordinated transportation system with equity considerations around school choice. These changes should incorporate considerations of where students are walking to school and whether their pathways are safe. One school staff member noted:

“ We have kids that literally live 800 feet away across Kirkwood Highway...You cannot walk across Kirkwood Highway ... Kirkwood Highway, it's a highway.”

- School Staff

City of Wilmington students deserve free and safe passage to and from school. By incorporating a multifaceted approach to providing safe transportation and aligning schedules with the city's many community partners, the Redding Consortium can remove a major barrier to attendance, increase participation in the programs that are so critical for student development, and eliminate an additional stressor impacting families in times of economic hardship.

Conclusion

This Social Drivers of Health and Education Landscape Analysis provides a call to action based on the experiences of students, parents and guardians, community elders, and staff from schools and community-based organizations. Their stories clearly demonstrate that public safety, mental health, housing, and transportation are key social drivers creating significant impediments to the health and education of students.

The contributors to this report tell us clearly that these social drivers are real and shape their options and choices in concrete and powerful ways.

They ask us to understand that social isolation caused by community violence and a lack of safe public spaces deepens the conditions for poor mental health.

They urge us to feel how disruptive it is to lose your home and leave your school, your friends, and the adults who care about you.

They ask you to hear that there must be places for community healing—spaces where children can meet one another when they are very young and develop relationships over time so that simply being in a school or a gym isn't a threat to their safety or lives.

Their stories also urge us to recognize that social drivers can be changed and that we must have the will to take bold action.

While the redistricting process holds promise for providing the foundations for structural equity, it is insufficient on its own to address social drivers. The Redding Consortium recognizes that they must also ensure that impacted schools and districts receive additional supports and that the new district system be undergirded by a robust wraparound service system.

Given the short timeframe for submitting a redistricting plan, the Consortium should consider a greater investment of time and human resources to ensure that the wraparound service plan addresses the key social drivers highlighted in this report. Additional capacity and expertise may be needed to develop the specific service blueprints and operational protocols necessary for the wraparound services to be as interconnected, comprehensive, and impactful as the deeply entrenched social challenges they seek to solve.

Additionally, while these planning efforts must aim for quality services at scale, the findings in this report highlight that the wraparound service plan must also include targeted and immediate plans for historically marginalized and under-resourced neighborhoods—such as Southbridge, Hedgeville, Browntown, Hilltop, Vendevere Avenue, Eastlawn, and Riverside—where these social drivers are acutely experienced and demand differentiated, intensive support.

Suggested Priorities for Wraparound Services Plan

To guide next steps in developing a comprehensive wraparound plan, we conclude this report by summarizing specific, experience-based recommendations compiled from participants in this landscape analysis, the Center for Structural Equity's Youth Research Team, and priority recommendations from the 77 community members who attended the September 27, 2025 Community Co-interpretation Event.

Mental Health: Access, De-Stigmatization, and Systemic Support

Mental health emerged as a top priority across the landscape analysis and the Youth Research Team's social driver survey. These findings, corroborated by community co-interpretation discussions, inform the following recommendations:

- Significantly improve and expand School-Based Mental Health Services, ensuring licensed providers are available beyond the scope of traditional counselor duties.
- Integrate comprehensive mental health education into the new district curriculum and fund a youth-centered anti-stigma campaign, actively supported by a newly established Youth Mental Health Advisory Board.
- Develop a network of no-cost or low-cost community mental health clinics and strengthen insurance protections.
- Provide enhanced mental health supports and training for educators.
- Work proactively to break down generational mental health stigmas to address parent consent and access barriers.

Public Safety: Protective Environments, Healthy Relationships, and Safe Passages

The landscape analysis participants and Youth Research Team clearly showed that community violence perpetuates a culture of fear and student isolation that limits access to enrichment programs, public spaces, and school options. This problem, often fueled by conflict between neighborhoods, requires a new approach. We must create a proactive, trauma-informed safety plan to ensure students can get to school safely and receive an equitable education.

- Embed licensed social workers in schools for trauma support and conflict intervention and integrate anti-bullying and conflict resolution as core curriculum components.
- Create and fund additional safe public spaces and community centers for youth to gather and develop positive inter-neighborhood relationships when they are young.
- Create "Trust Networks" with community members stationed at key locations (e.g., bus stops, school entrances) to ensure safe navigation of the city.
- Establish Uber-style vans and more point-to-point transportation options (i.e., not at bus stops) to enable students to safely reach schools and extracurricular activities.

Housing: Crisis Intervention, Family Empowerment, and Local Partnerships

Housing is an educational building block and key driver of student mobility. The wraparound plan must focus on stabilizing families and confronting housing affordability and tenant awareness. Key recommendations include:

- Prioritize McKinney-Vento families for affordable housing solutions.
- Connect families with free legal representation in eviction cases.
- Couple housing vouchers with long-term case management and mandatory family financial literacy programs starting in elementary school to support asset-building and mitigate "benefit cliffs."
- Partner with local rental property owners to brainstorm potential options for rent stabilization and investigate the impact of special interest groups and lobbies on the housing market.

Transportation: Unified Planning, Flexible Timing, and Stable Workforce

Addressing systemic transportation issues is crucial to resolving chronic absenteeism and ensuring equity of access in the new district configuration. A unified plan must address safety, accessibility, and workforce stability:

- Create a unified transportation plan aligned with the new district configuration.
- Develop flexible school start times and protocols to mitigate chronic lateness caused by transit delays.
- Create DART-run minivan programs for after-school and cross-town activities, investing in the transportation necessary for students to access sports and extracurriculars.
- Improve reliability and quality by making bus drivers full-time with full benefits to stabilize the workforce.

Sustained Investment in Youth Voice

Finally, the Youth Research Team provided invaluable, authentic, and human-centered data, highlighting the critical distinction between their lived experiences and what services and supports are needed. Currently supported only through a temporary 8-week summer stipend via the City of Wilmington's Youth Career Development program, this mechanism is insufficient for complex, year-round policy development.

We propose that the city of Wilmington expand its Youth Career Development program from its current 8-week summer stipend to 12 months of sustained funding for an expanded cohort of student researchers. This investment will embed youth experts directly into the redistricting and wraparound services planning and implementation processes, ensuring the new district leaders and their partners receive continuous, invaluable insight into the lived experiences of students as they lead the next steps of this ambitious and critical work.

References

- Aazami, A., Valek, R., Ponce, A. N., & Zare, H. (2023). Risk and protective factors and interventions for reducing juvenile delinquency: A systematic review. *Social Sciences*, 12(9), 474. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12090474>
- Afterschool Alliance. (2020). *America after 3PM: Demand grows, opportunity shrinks*.
- Berg, M., & Seaton, M. (2019). The role of school belonging in academic motivation and performance among high school students. *Australian Journal of Education*, 63(1), 95–113. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0004944118823576>
- Borofsky, L. A., Kellerman, I., Baucom, B., Oliver, P. H., & Margolin, G. (2013). Community violence exposure and adolescents' school engagement and academic achievement over time. *Psychology of Violence*, 3(4), 381–395. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0034121>
- Brennan, M., Reed, P., & Sturtevant, L. (2014). *The impacts of affordable housing on education: A research summary*. Center for Housing Policy.
- Chang, Hedy N and Romero, Mariajosé 2008. *Present, Engaged and Accounted For The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades*. National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP): The Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2024). *PLACES: Local data for better health*. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/places>
- Cohen, E., McAlister Groves, B., & Kracke, K. (2009). *Understanding children's exposure to violence*.
- Delaware Department of Education, Technology & Data Office. (2025). *Student enrollment data, 2022–2025*.
- Eisenberg, D., Golberstein, E., & Hunt, J. B. (2009). Mental health and academic success in college. *The B.E. Journal of Economic Analysis & Policy*, 9(1). <https://doi.org/10.2202/1935-1682.2191>
- Frederick, T. J., Chwalek, M., Hughes, J., Karabanow, J., & Kidd, S. (2014). How stable is stable? Defining and measuring housing stability. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 42(8), 964–979. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.21665>
- Galvez, M., & Luna, J. (2014). *Homelessness and housing instability: The impact on education outcomes*. The Urban Institute.
- Jamil, D., Rayyan, M., Abdulla Hameed, A. K., Masood, F., Javed, P., & Sreejith, A. (2022). The impact of commute on students' performance. *Journal of Medical and Health Studies*, 3(3), 66–74. <https://doi.org/10.32996/jmhs.2022.3.3.9>

- Milam, A. J., Furr-Holden, C. D. M., & Leaf, P. J. (2010). Perceived school and neighborhood safety, neighborhood violence and academic achievement in urban school children. *The Urban Review*, 42(5), 458–467. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-010-0165-7>
- Opportunity Insights & U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.). *The Opportunity Atlas: Mapping economic mobility across the U.S.* Retrieved from <https://opportunityatlas.org>
- Princeton University Eviction Lab. (n.d.). *Eviction data*. Retrieved from <https://evictionlab.org>
- Sanderson Edwards, D. (2024). Another one rides the bus: The impact of school transportation on student outcomes in Michigan. *Education Finance and Policy*, 19(1), 1–30. https://doi.org/10.1162/edfp_a_00349
- University of Delaware Institute for Public Administration. (2018). *Community asset dataset*.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). *American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates, 2019–2023, Table DP04: Selected Housing Characteristics*. Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov>
- Voulgaris, C. T., Smart, M. J., & Taylor, B. D. (2019). Tired of commuting? Relationships among journeys to school, sleep, and exercise among American teenagers. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 39(2), 142–154. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X17725148>

About the American Institutes for Research®

Established in 1946, the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) is a nonpartisan, not-for-profit institution that conducts behavioral and social science research and delivers technical assistance both domestically and internationally in the areas of education, health, and the workforce. AIR's work is driven by its mission to generate and use rigorous evidence that contributes to a better, more equitable world. With headquarters in Arlington, Virginia, AIR has offices across the U.S. and abroad. For more information, visit [AIR.ORG](https://www.air.org).



AIR® Headquarters

1400 Crystal Drive, 10th Floor
Arlington, VA 22202-3289
+1.202.403.5000 | [AIR.ORG](https://www.air.org)

Notice of Trademark: "American Institutes for Research" and "AIR" are registered trademarks. All other brand, product, or company names are trademarks or registered trademarks of their respective owners.

Copyright © 2025 American Institutes for Research®. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, website display, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the American Institutes for Research. For permission requests, please use the Contact Us form on [AIR.ORG](https://www.air.org).

28870_09/25