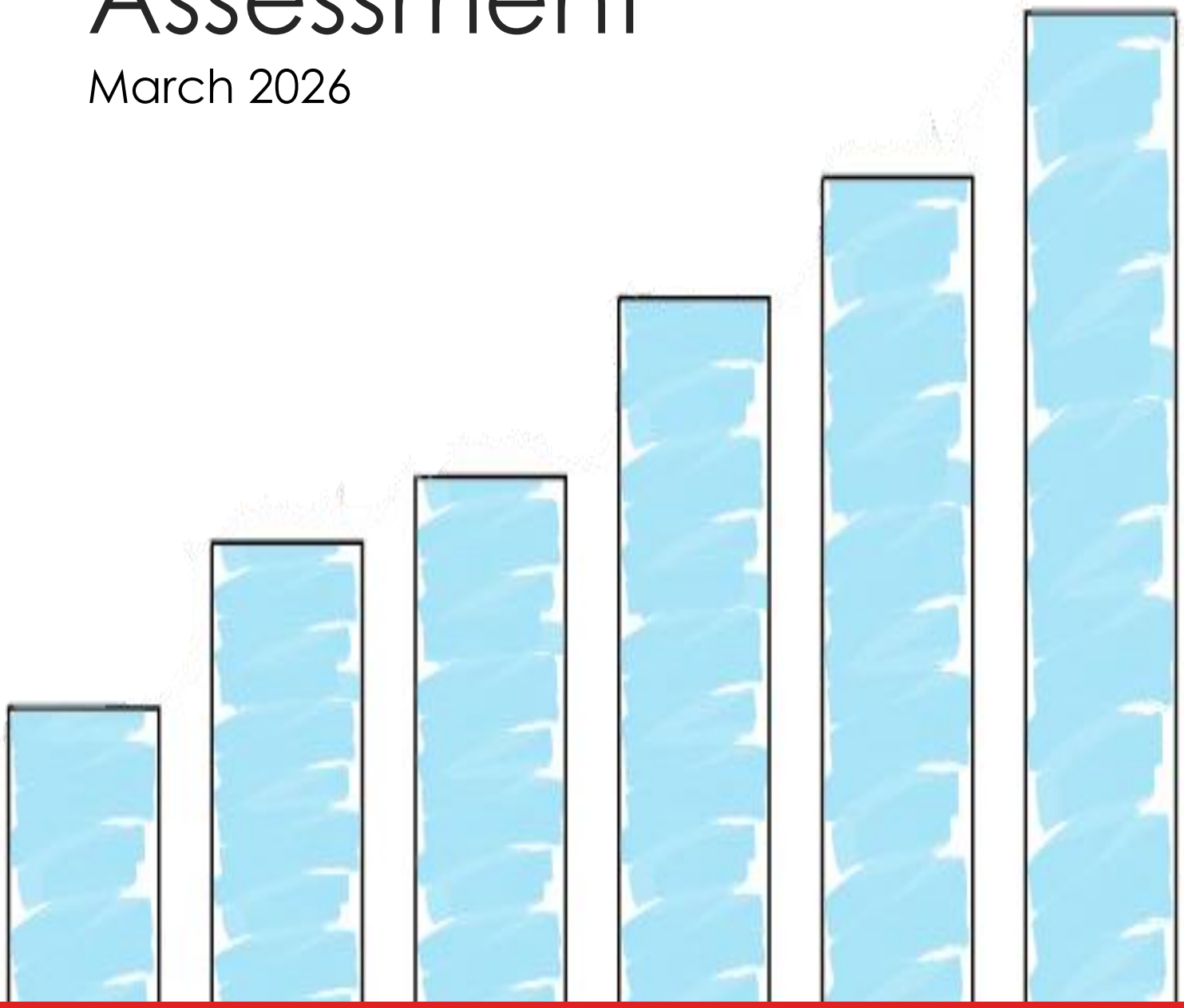
Annual Community Assessment

March 2026



South Central Iowa Community Action Program
Early Childhood Program

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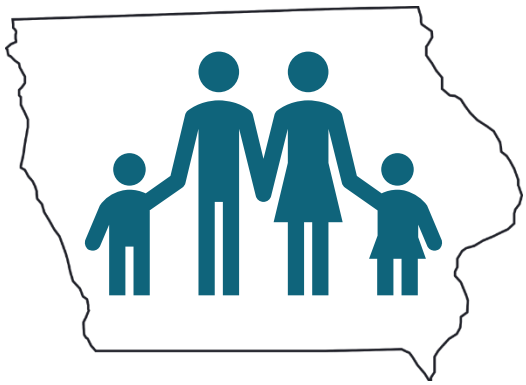
ABOUT THE

Community Needs Assessment



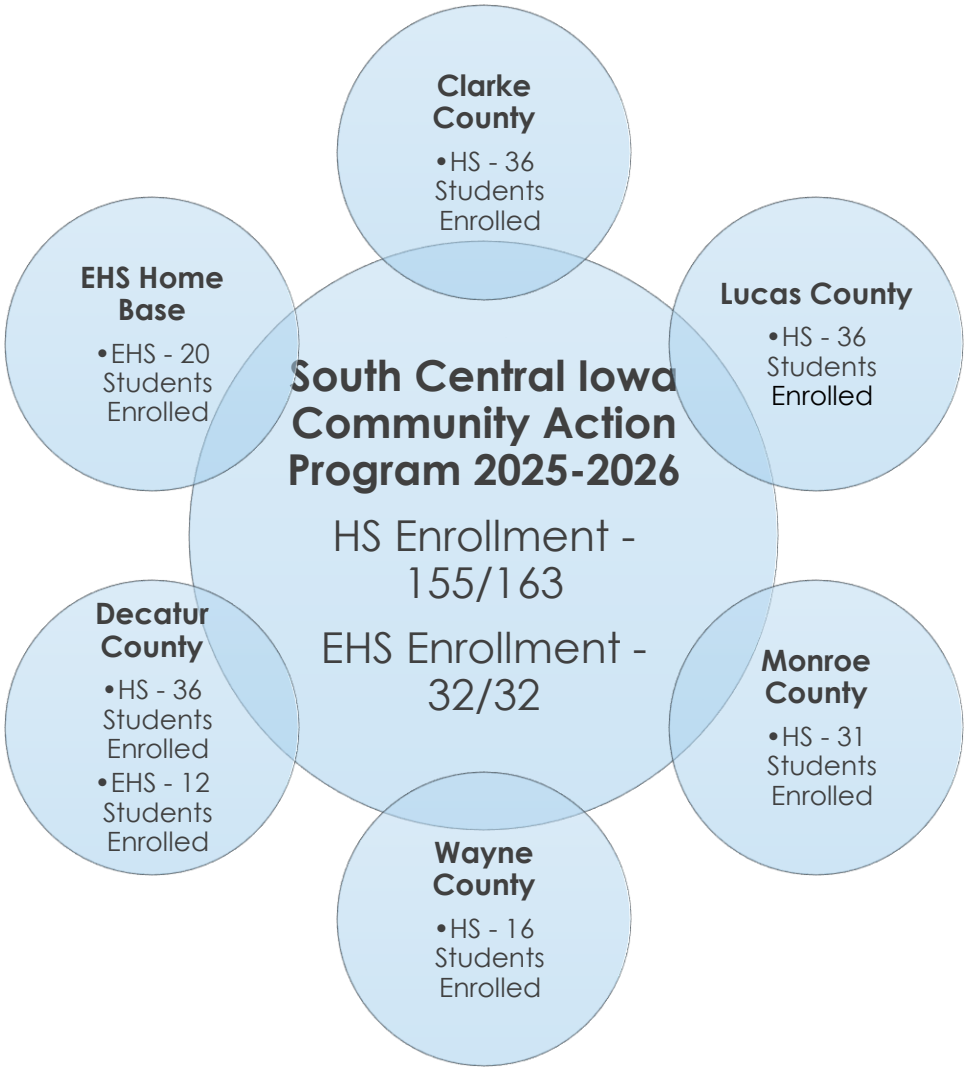
South Central Iowa Community Action Program - Early Childhood Program (SCICAP-ECP) completes a community needs assessment of South-Central Iowa annually to help understand the changing needs of the communities and people we serve. The five Iowa counties included in this community needs assessment are Clarke, Decatur, Lucas, Monroe, & Wayne counties.

The 2025-2026 community assessment provides the most recent data available regarding demographics, early learning programs, disabilities, health and nutrition, and social services. The information that is included in the Community Assessment is to be utilized to make certain we are meeting our communities needs by determining short-term and long-term program goals and objectives.

Introduction

South Central Iowa Community Action Program – Early Childhood Program (SCICAP-ECP) provides services to children and families in 5 counties in South Central Iowa: Clarke County, Lucas County, Monroe County, Wayne County, and Decatur County. Our service area covers 2,360 square miles of Iowa's South-Central territory. SCICAP is federally funded to deliver services to 163 Head Start students and 32 Early Head Start students.

As of March 2026, the diagram below details SCICAP's 2025-2026 enrollment.



*South Central Iowa Community Action Program provides an EHS home based service to all five counties, therefore, data from these home base programs are included in this report.

Head Start & Early Head Start Program Summary

Through center-based, home-based, and collaborative partnerships, SCICAP-ECP provides Head Start and Early Head Start services to 195 low-income children ages birth to five, their families and pregnant women within the five-county area. In 2024-2025, cumulative enrollment for Head Start and Early Head Start included 221 children, representing 200 families. In some families, multiple children attended the program. Children are served in five centers, four community school collaborations and EHS home-based options throughout the five counties we cover. SCICAP-ECP provides services in 18 classrooms, including 16 Head Start classrooms and 2 Early Head Start classrooms. Additionally, SCICAP-ECP maintains a waitlist with infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and pregnant women.

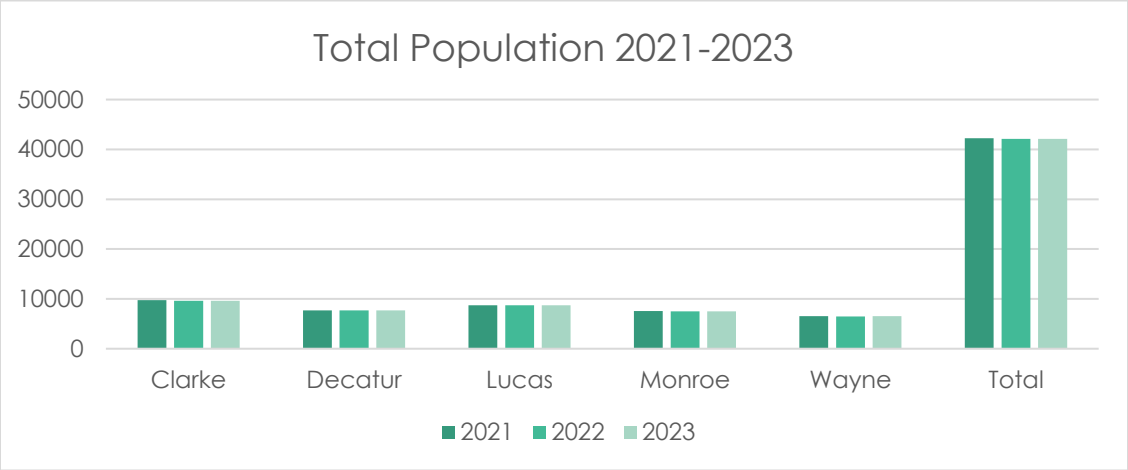
Head Start programs promote the school readiness of preschool-aged children from low-income families. Services are provided in a classroom setting. Head Start programs also engage parents and/or other key family members in forming positive relationships, with a focus on family wellbeing.

Early Head Start programs provide similar services as the Head Start programs, but the services are tailored more towards the unique needs of infants and toddlers. Early Head Start programs promote the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development of infants and toddlers through safe and developmentally enriching care. Promoting these four major domains of development prepares these children for continued growth, development and eventual success in their school and life.

Demographics

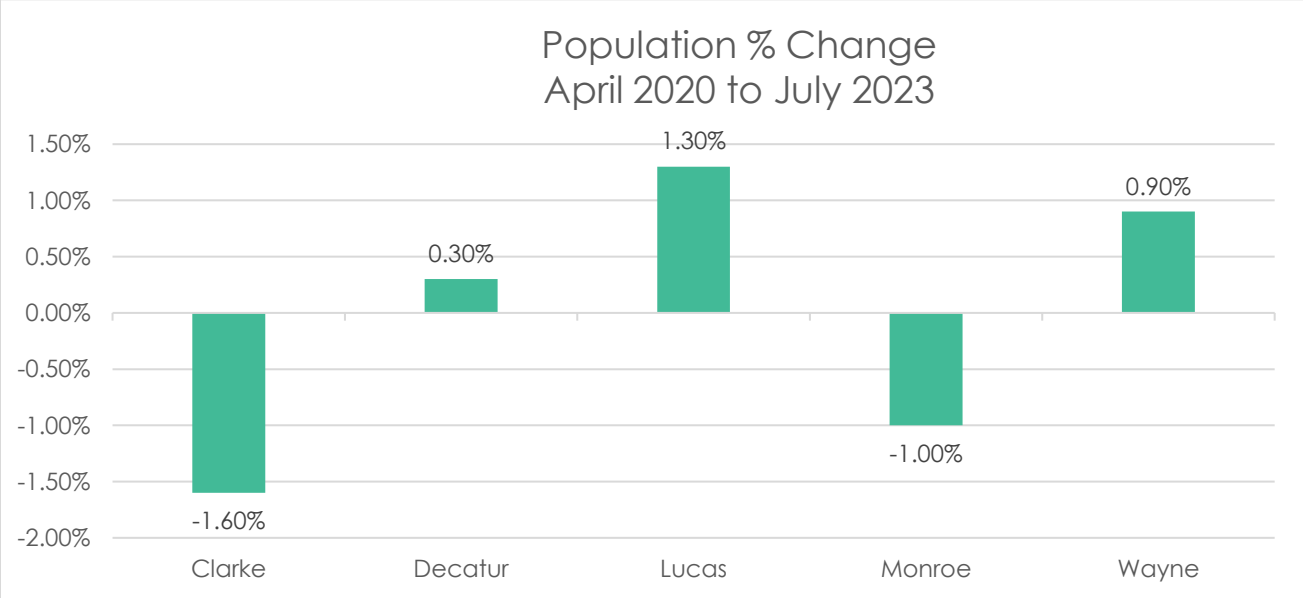
Population Data

According to the Iowa Data Center, an official website of the State of Iowa, three of the counties (Clarke, Decatur, and Monroe) served by our program have had a slight decrease in population and two counties (Lucas and Wayne) have had a slight increase in population.



Source: Iowa Data Center (2019-2023 American Community Survey)

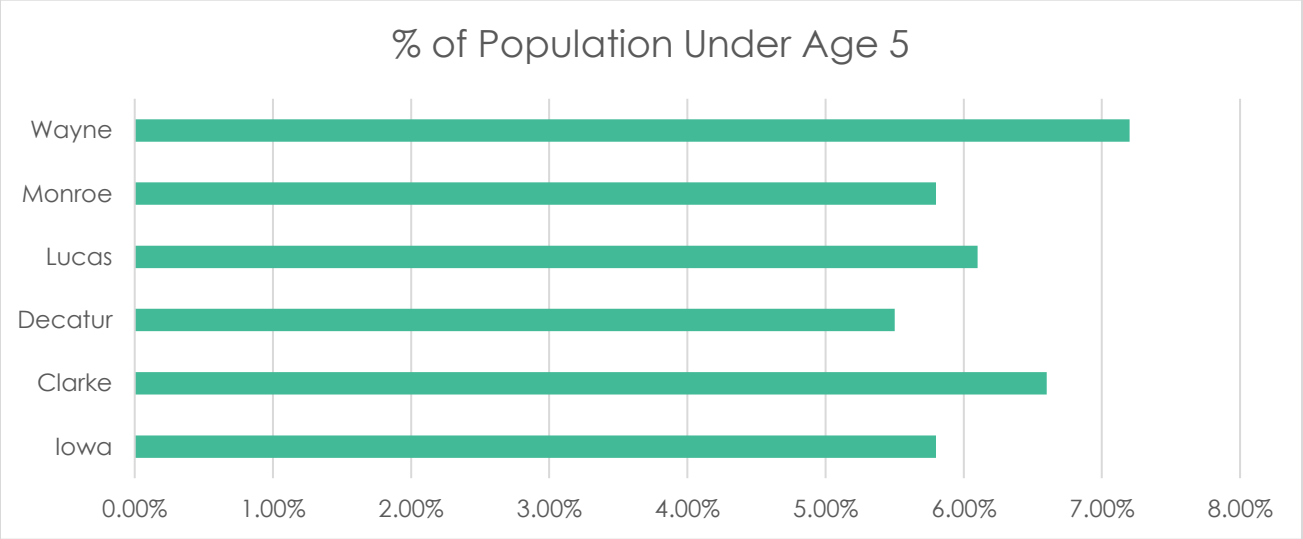
Within the past 10 years, the county that has shown the most significant population percent change is Clarke County by a decrease of -1.6%. The county that has shown the greatest increase in their percent change is Lucas County by +1.30%.



Source: Iowa Data Center (2019-2023 American Community Survey)

Population Data Continued

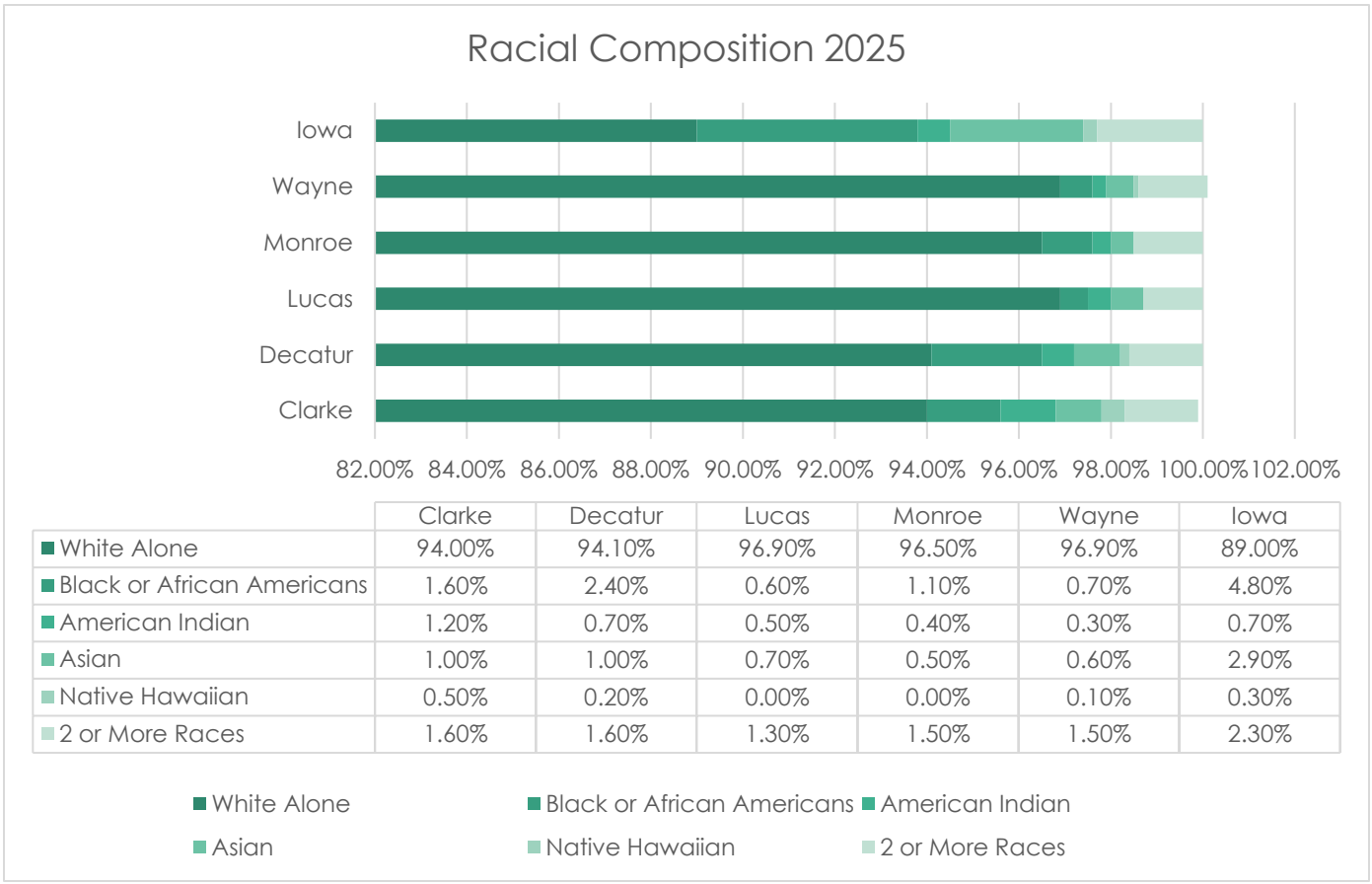
The graphic below displays the percentage of children in our five counties that are under the age of five. The greatest percentage of children under the age of five is in Wayne County at 7.2% with the lowest in Decatur County at 5.0%.



Source: U.S Census Bureau – Iowa County QuickFacts(July 1st, 2025)

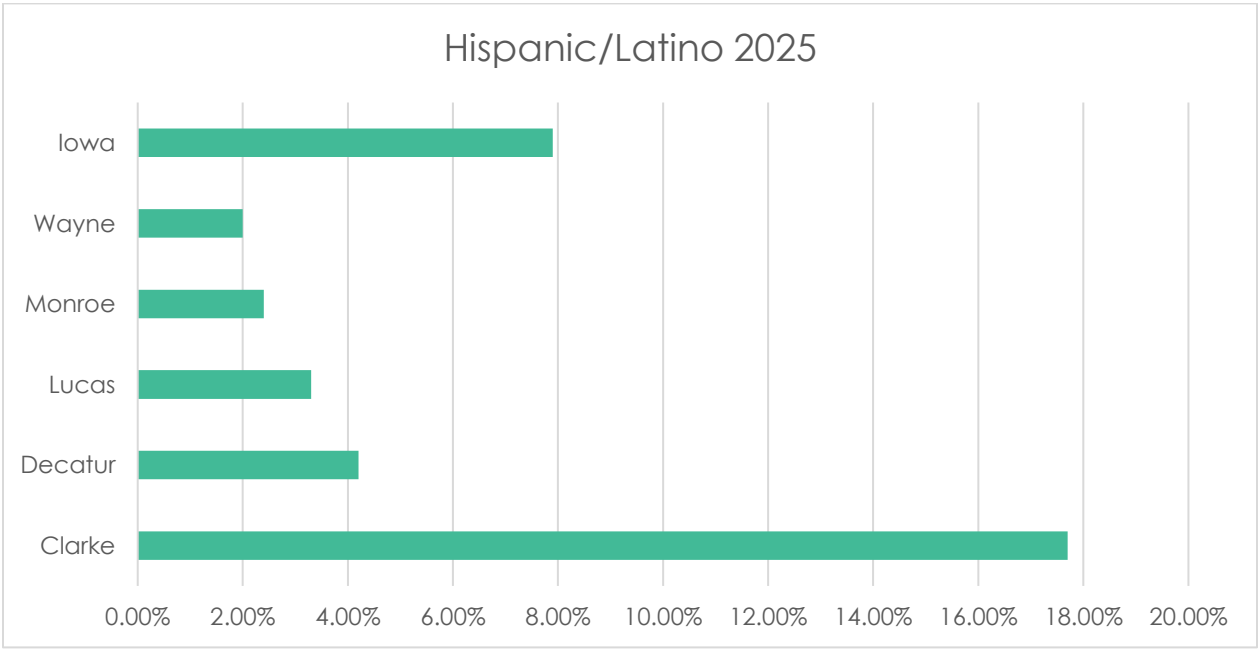
Race & Ethnicity Data

The State of Iowa's minority population in 2025 was 11.0%. This is higher than our five county-wide average of 4.32%. SCICAP-ECP's 2019 racial composition rates exhibit that our diversity rates are much lower than the State of Iowa's rates in all categories except for the Hispanic/Latino population in Clarke County. Clarke county's Hispanic/Latino population reached 17.7%, which is 9.8% higher than the State of Iowa's Hispanic/Latino population data.



	Clarke	Decatur	Lucas	Monroe	Wayne	Iowa
White Alone	94.00%	94.10%	96.90%	96.50%	96.90%	89.00%
Black or African Americans	1.60%	2.40%	0.60%	1.10%	0.70%	4.80%
American Indian	1.20%	0.70%	0.50%	0.40%	0.30%	0.70%
Asian	1.00%	1.00%	0.70%	0.50%	0.60%	2.90%
Native Hawaiian	0.50%	0.20%	0.00%	0.00%	0.10%	0.30%
2 or More Races	1.60%	1.60%	1.30%	1.50%	1.50%	2.30%

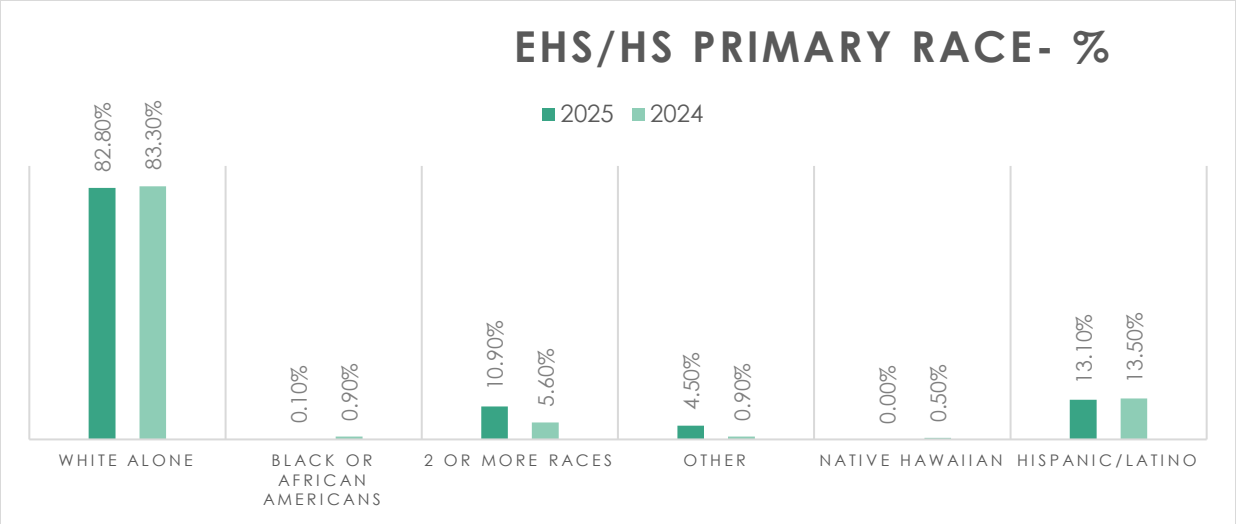
Source: U.S Census Bureau - Iowa County QuickFacts (July 1st, 2025)



Source: U.S Census Bureau - Iowa County QuickFacts (July 1st, 2025)

EHS/HS Race & Ethnicity

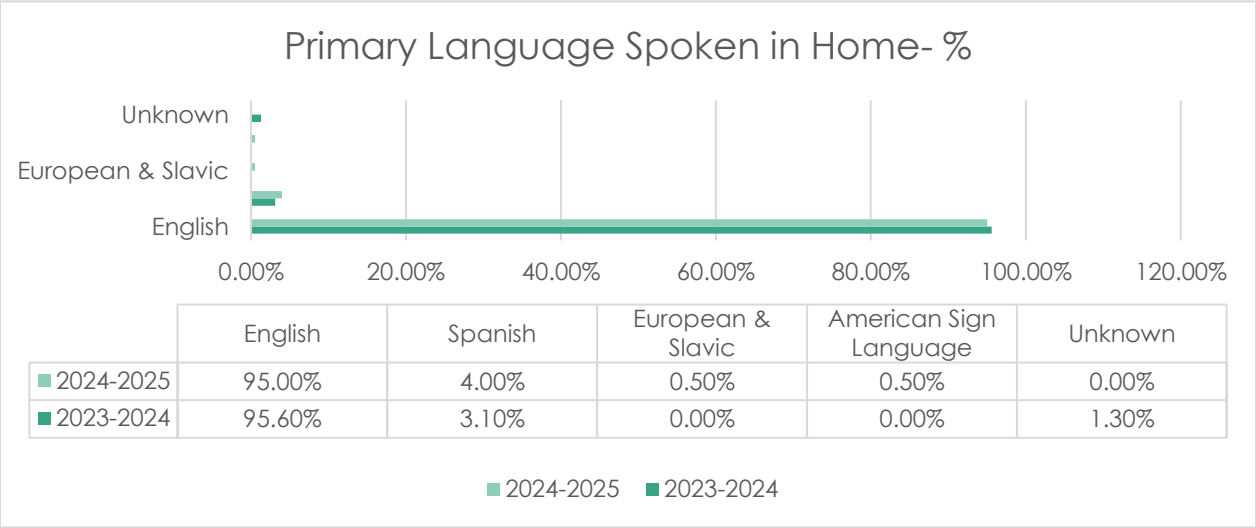
SCICAP-ECP's program race and ethnicity data continue to change showing a less diverse 2024-2025 school year than the prior year.



Source: SCICAP ChildPlus Data

EHS/HS Primary Language

During the 2024-2025 school year, 95% of our student's primary language at home was English, 4.0% was Spanish, 0.5% were European & Slavic, and 0.5% were utilizing sign language. English remains to be our student's predominant language in their homes. However, between this year and the year prior, our total number of Spanish-speaking families increased across our programs by 0.9%.

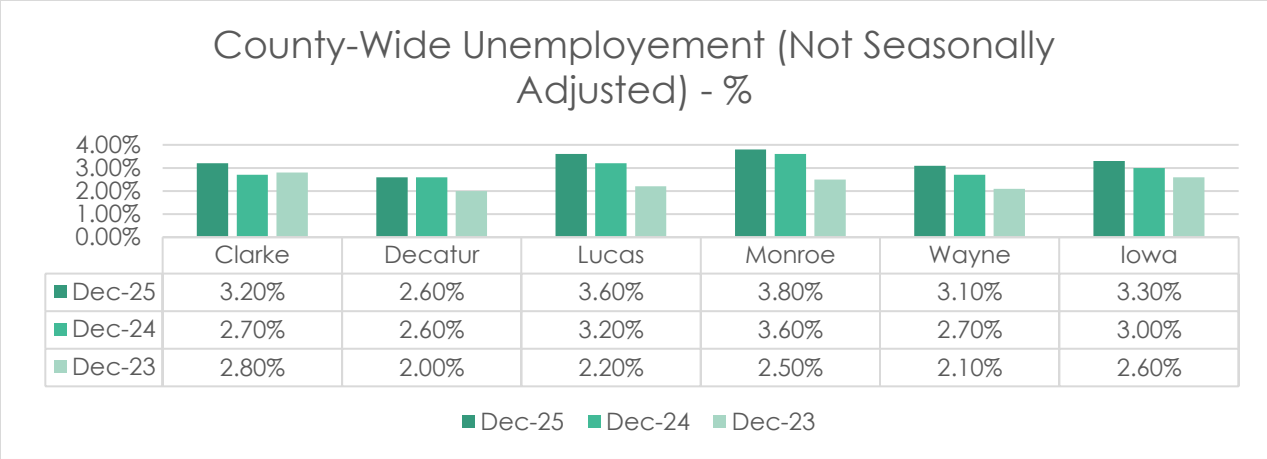


	English	Spanish	European & Slavic	American Sign Language	Unknown
2024-2025	95.00%	4.00%	0.50%	0.50%	0.00%
2023-2024	95.60%	3.10%	0.00%	0.00%	1.30%

Source: SCICAP-ECP ChildPlus Data

Employment Data

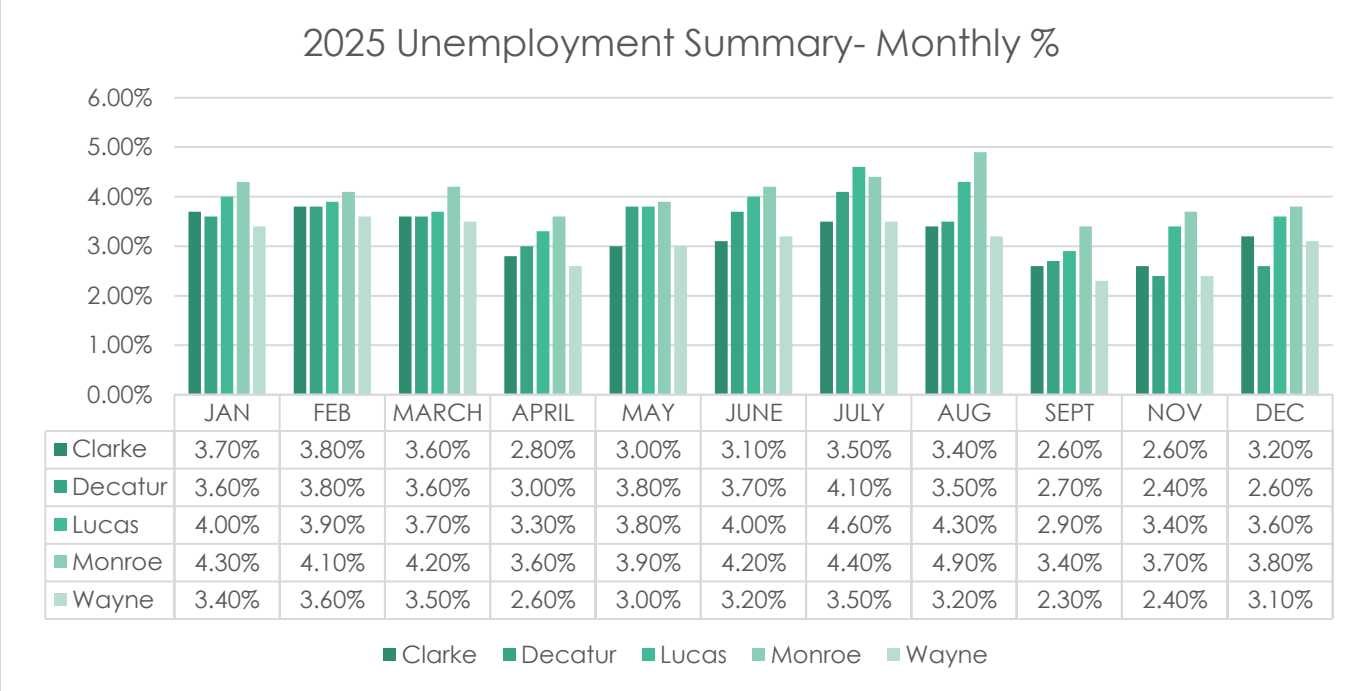
Unemployment percentages have been rising in not only our five counties, but in the State of Iowa as a whole. Four of our county's unemployment percentages went up in 2025 by at least 0.2% compared to 2024. Two counties have a higher unemployment rate in 2025 than the State of Iowa while three counties have a lower unemployment rate than the state average.



	Clarke	Decatur	Lucas	Monroe	Wayne	Iowa
Dec-25	3.20%	2.60%	3.60%	3.80%	3.10%	3.30%
Dec-24	2.70%	2.60%	3.20%	3.60%	2.70%	3.00%
Dec-23	2.80%	2.00%	2.20%	2.50%	2.10%	2.60%

Source: Iowa Workforce Development – Unemployment Rate by County (Not Seasonally Adjusted)

There is a scarcity of well-paying jobs in our five county area and many of the families we serve are forced to work multiple jobs, travel outside of their home county or move to more populated areas such as the metro Des Moines area for better wages.



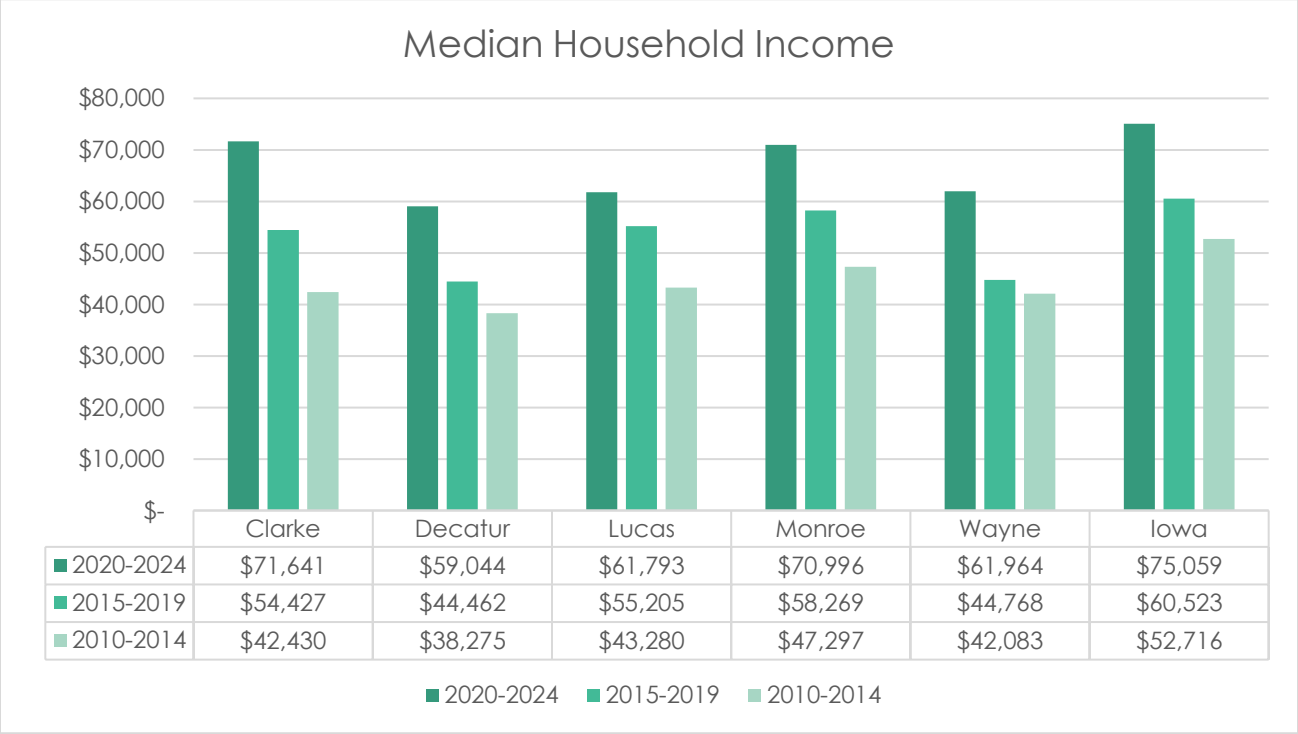
	JAN	FEB	MARCH	APRIL	MAY	JUNE	JULY	AUG	SEPT	NOV	DEC
Clarke	3.70%	3.80%	3.60%	2.80%	3.00%	3.10%	3.50%	3.40%	2.60%	2.60%	3.20%
Decatur	3.60%	3.80%	3.60%	3.00%	3.80%	3.70%	4.10%	3.50%	2.70%	2.40%	2.60%
Lucas	4.00%	3.90%	3.70%	3.30%	3.80%	4.00%	4.60%	4.30%	2.90%	3.40%	3.60%
Monroe	4.30%	4.10%	4.20%	3.60%	3.90%	4.20%	4.40%	4.90%	3.40%	3.70%	3.80%
Wayne	3.40%	3.60%	3.50%	2.60%	3.00%	3.20%	3.50%	3.20%	2.30%	2.40%	3.10%

Source: Iowa Workforce Development – 2025 Iowa Labor Force Summary (Unadjusted)

Household Income

The 2024 average Median Income Level between our five counties was $65,087.60, an increase from 2019 when the average Median Income was $52,432.20 (this number is calculated before taxes are taken out.) The overall growth in the Median Income level for our counties amounts to ~~be~~ $9,971.40 less than the average Iowans Median Household Income.

As our low-income families are working to make ends meet, it is essential to have secure and educational options for their children such as our Early Head Start and Head Start programs. Low-income families often struggle to afford a licensed daycare or preschool.



	Clarke	Decatur	Lucas	Monroe	Wayne	Iowa
2020-2024	$71,641	$59,044	$61,793	$70,996	$61,964	$75,059
2015-2019	$54,427	$44,462	$55,205	$58,269	$44,768	$60,523
2010-2014	$42,430	$38,275	$43,280	$47,297	$42,083	$52,716

Source: State of Iowa Data Center – Median Household Income

Cost of Living

Single-Parent Families Cost of Living in Iowa 2023

Monthly Expenses	*One Child*
Rent and Utilities	$851
Food	$470
Health Care	$231
Child Care	$845
Clothing & Household Expenses	$432
Transportation	$643
Monthly Total Expenses	**$3,647**
Annual Total Expenses	**$43,762**
Annual Before-Tax Earnings Needed	**$51,256**

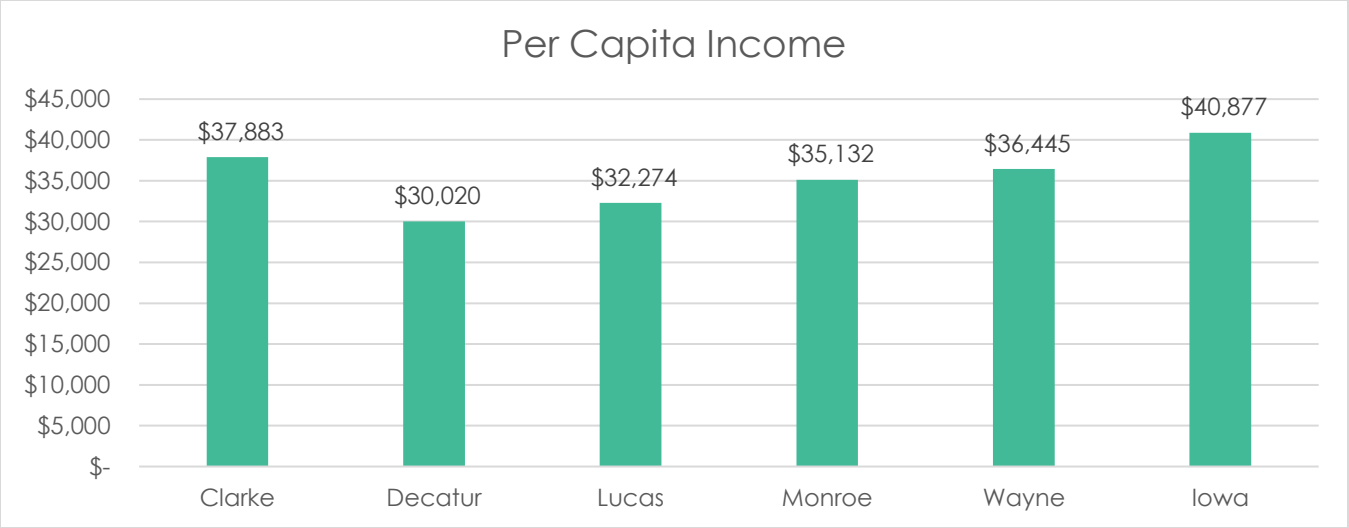
Two-Working Parent Families Cost of Living in Iowa 2023

Monthly Expenses	*Two Children*
Rent and Utilities	$851
Food	$938
Health Care	$798
Child Care	$1279
Clothing & Household Expenses	$630
Transportation	$1,374
Monthly Total Expenses	**$5,870**
Annual Total Expenses	**$70,446**
Annual Before-Tax Earnings Needed	**$81,330**

Source: Common Good Iowa– The Cost of Living in Iowa – 9th Edition

Income Per Capita

Per Capita is a measurement of a population's economic output that accounts for each individual person within the individual county. This measurement more accurately represents the income of families within our program that are single parents or in a two-parent household with only one parent working. For each resident within our five-counties, our average per capita for 2024 is $34,350.80 which is $30,737 less than our five-counties average Median Household Income.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau – County QuickFacts (July 1st, 2024)

Cost of Living Explanation

When considering our five-county 2024 Median Household Income average of $65,087.60 and our average 2024 per capita income is $34,350.80, our families would have minimal to no money left for other expenses after covering basic living costs. This is based on the Common Good Iowa – The Cost of Living in Iowa – 9th Edition figures.

This illustrates the significance of the available federal and state support programs for the families we serve.

Poverty Rates

In 2026, the poverty guideline per household was changed to $33,000 for a family of four. For a family smaller than four persons you would subtract $5,680 per person in the household.

Example - A family made up of 3 persons the poverty guideline would be:

$33,000 - $5,680 = **$27,320**

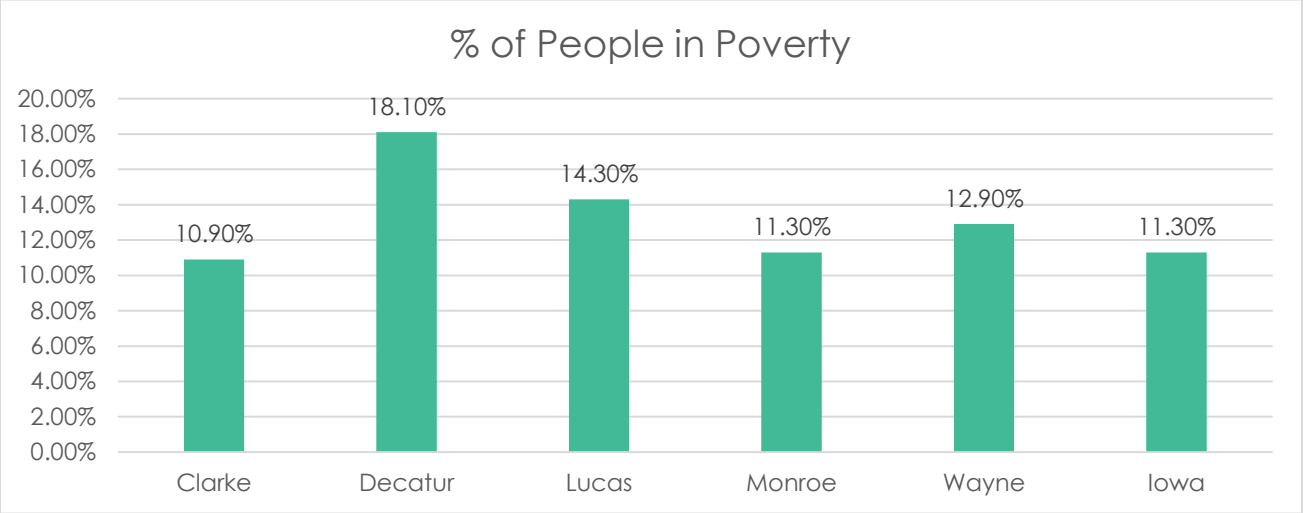
As the poverty line changes for smaller families it also changes for larger families. For each additional family member over the set four-person household guideline you would add $5,680.

Example - A family made up of 6 persons poverty guideline would be:

$33,000+ $5,680 + $5,680 = **$44,360**

Our service area continues to be one of the most impoverished in Iowa. According to the US Census Bureau, in 2024 a total of 11.3% of people were living below the poverty

line in the State of Iowa. Across our five service counties, the average percent living below poverty was 13.5%.



Source: US Census Bureau– Economic County Quick Facts (July 1st, 2024)

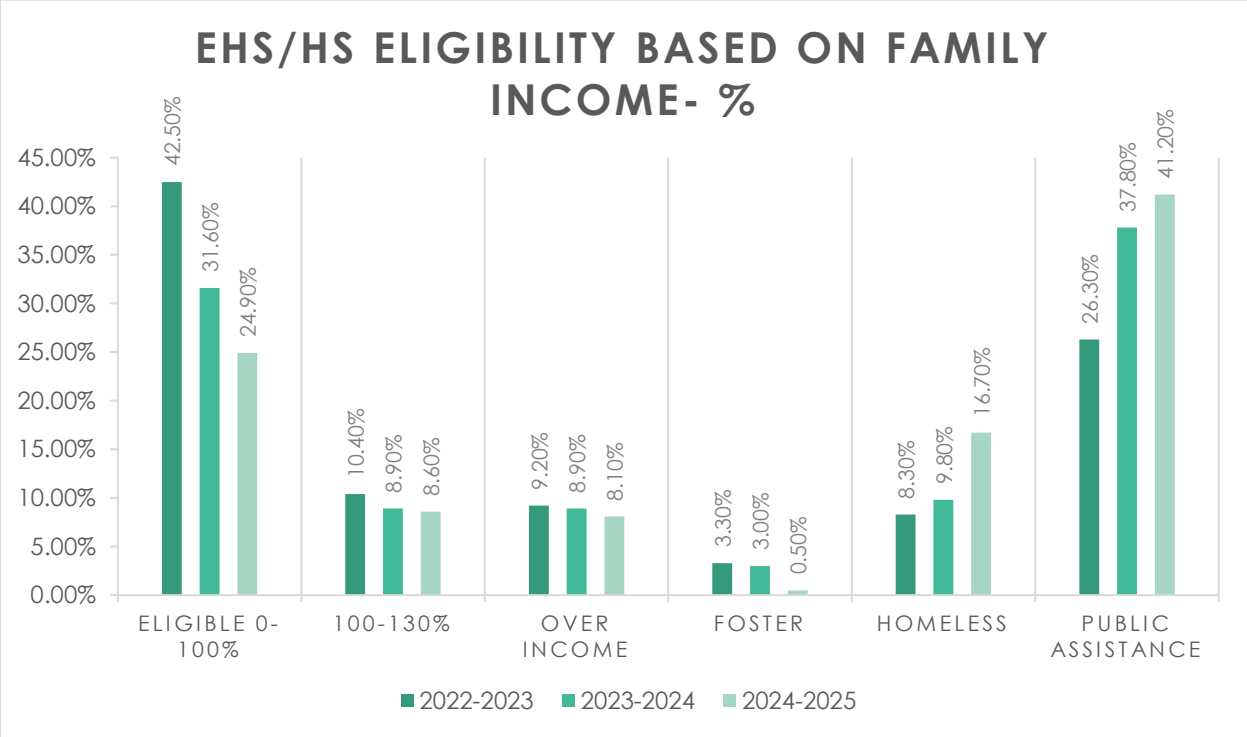
Childhood Poverty

As our service area's populations have stayed stagnant within the past three years, there continues to be a need for Head Start and Early Head Start services for children under the age of 5 who are living in poverty within our counties. Childhood poverty has been proven to have lasting effects on children as they grow older such as physical and mental health problems. Our five counties' average childhood poverty percentage is 19% compared to the state of Iowa's 12.3%. This demonstrates how impoverished South-Central Iowa is. Providing services to children within these areas will benefit the children's educational and physical development as well as support their family's well-being.

Source: Kids COUNT – Childhood Poverty in Iowa

Parent and Family Program Data Overview

SCICAP-ECP is continuously working towards reaching children and families that are in need of childcare assistance for daycare or preschool. The graph below demonstrates this progress by presenting a growth in eligible children, foster children, homeless children, and public assistance children within our programs.

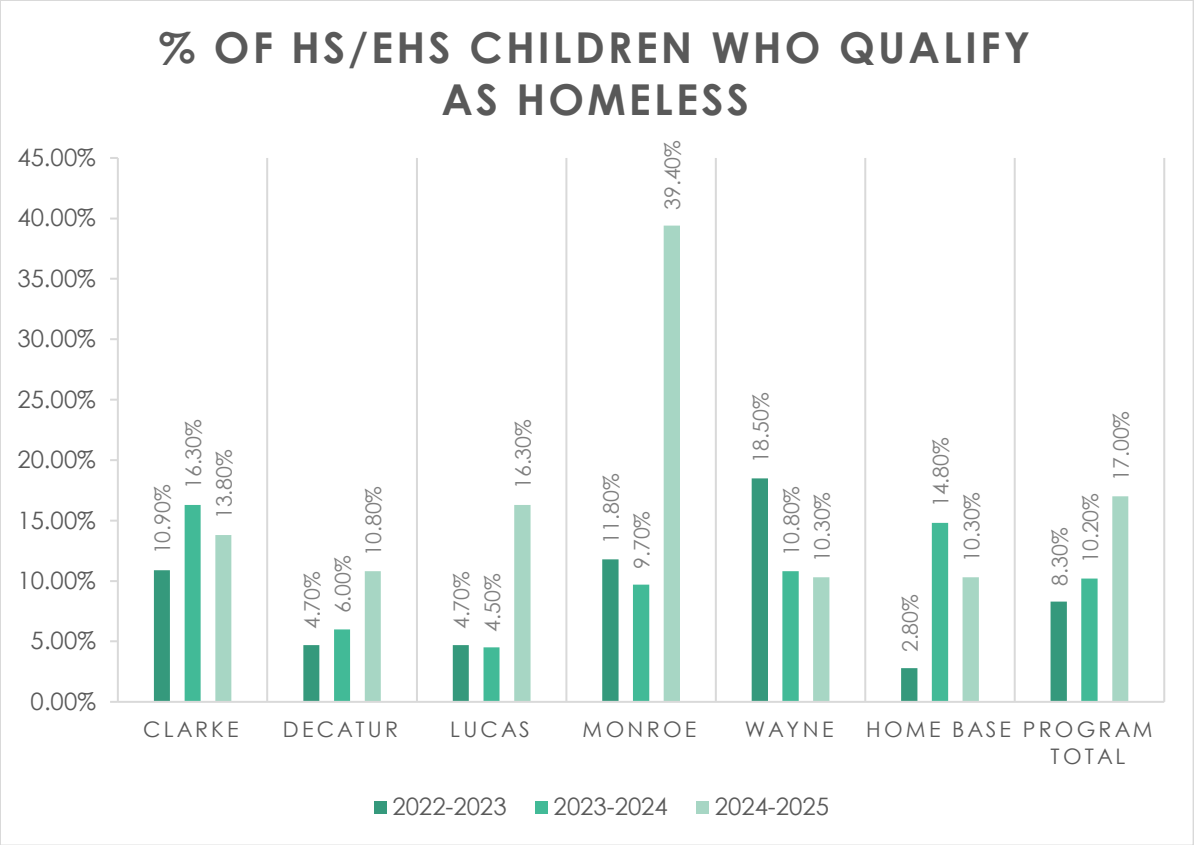


Source: SCICAP-ECP ChildPlus Data

Eligible Children

Children who are homeless or in foster care are 100% eligible for enrollment into the EHS/HS programs that SCICAP-ECP offers. Our program's goal is to serve these homeless and foster care children within our programs.

The data from the past three school years exhibits the gradual increase of homeless children that were enrolled in our program. This gradual increase among our programs' totals reflects the mission of our program and staff by reaching out and effectively supporting this vulnerable group of children and families.



Source: SCICAP-ECP ChildPlus Data

Childcare Availability

Childcare availability within our communities continues to be limited for families. There are 42 childcare facilities with a total capacity of 1,255 spots within our five-county service area. Not all these facilities are state licensed. According to the U.S. Census Bureau in 2025, in total we have an estimate of 2,575 children under the age of five in our five counties. The graph below displays the limited amount of childcare available in South-Central Iowa.

County	Childcare Providers (per DHS)	Childcare Capacity (per DHS)	Population Under Age 5 (Estimate)
Clarke County	12	401	681
Decatur County	7	193	459
Lucas County	6	219	521
Monroe County	11	248	460
Wayne County	6	194	454
Total	**42 Providers**	**1,255 Capacity**	**2,575 Children Under 5**

Source: Iowa Data Drive – March 2026
Iowa DHS Child Care Provider Portal

These totals did not include public school preschool capacity. HS/EHS center capacity was adjusted to maximum allowable classroom size per HS Performance Standards versus DHS Daycare Licensing capacity. Not all providers are licensed and registered with the State of Iowa. Not all providers accept Child Care Assistance funding.

In our 2025-2026 Community Needs Survey 55.6% of respondents listed finding affordable child care as one of the biggest challenges families with young children face in their community and nearly all respondents listed childcare as one of the top three services families in the community need more of showing that there is a need for more affordable childcare options for families in the communities we serve.

Disabilities

During the 2024-2025 school year, 39 children were referred for an evaluation to determine eligibility for an Individualized Education Program (IEP)/Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) in place. 30 of those children received an evaluation and 24 of those have an active IEP and 5 of the children have an active IFSP.

2024-2025 EHS/HS Disabilities

Disabilities	*EHS*	*HS*
Non-Categorical/Developmental Delay	6	7
Speech/Language Impairment	3	8
Emotional Disturbances	-	2
Down Syndrome/Non-Verbal	-	1
Autistic	-	1
Total	**9 Children**	**19 Children**

Source: SCICAP-ECP ChildPlus Data

SCICAP-ECP Disability Services

SCICAP-ECP has MOU's with Green Hills AEA and Great Prairie AEA to evaluate and support children who qualify for an IEP or IFSP. Our program also collaborates with the community school districts to ensure children who need extra supports are served.

The five-county service area includes a wide range of children receiving services provided by both early intervention providers – through a state-run regional system (Iowa Area Education Agencies/Early Access) – and preschool special education systems provided by the school districts. The school districts provide special education to preschoolers with special education needs within Head Start and other settings.

Health and Nutrition Data

Health/Immunizations 2024-2025:

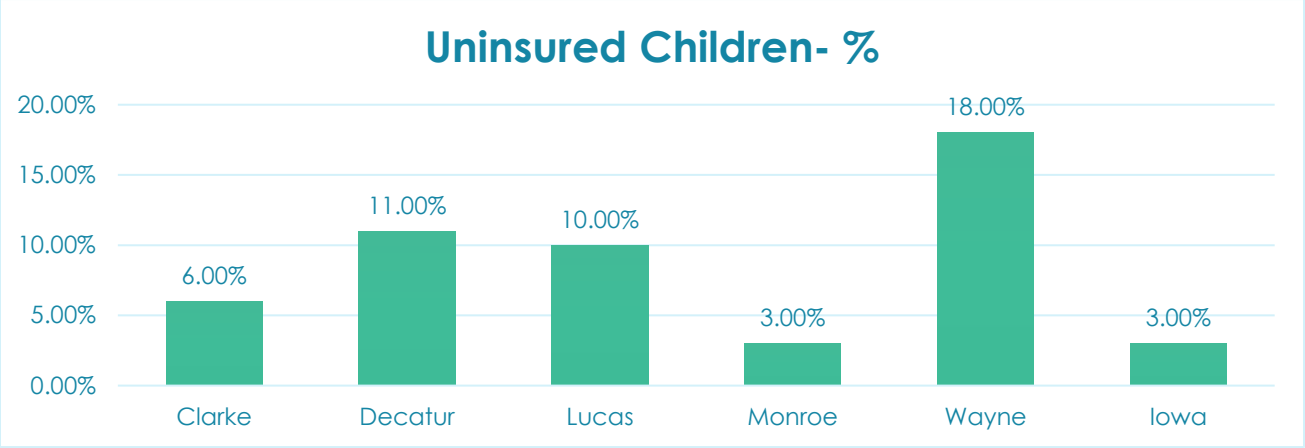
Head Start programs support children in receiving all vaccinations based on their age. SCICAP-ECP's 2024-2025 immunization data shows that 90% of our children who were enrolled in our programs have been fully immunized based on their age by the end of the school year.

SCICAP-ECP's 2024-2025 up-to-date medical service data based on the EPSDT schedule indicates that 80.0% of all children in the Head Start program were current. 97.8% were considered up to date with preventative dental services.

Public Health provides no-cost immunizations in all five counties. Infinity Health is a federally qualified health center that provides primary, preventive health care services to those living in Southern Iowa. Infinity Health provides comprehensive medical, behavioral, dental, substance abuse, vision, mammography, and in-house pharmacy. They also offer a sliding fee program to assist those who qualify.

Health Insurance/Uninsured Children

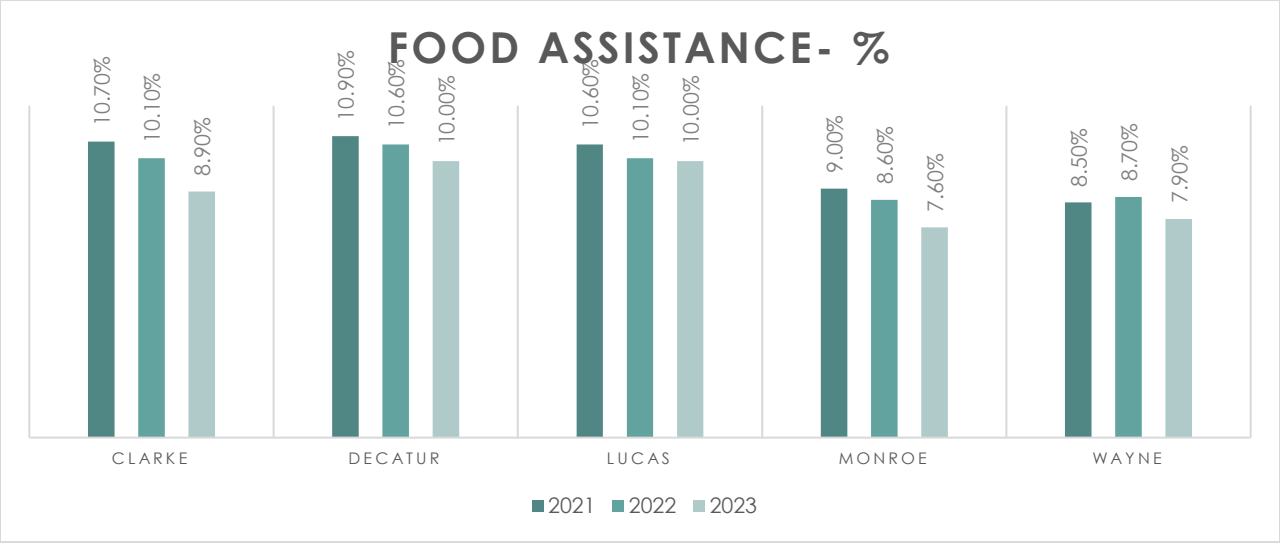
Iowa consistently has had one of the lowest percentages of uninsured children in the United States. Monroe County is the only county that we serve that was equal to the state average at 3.0% Wayne County's rate is more than six times the State of Iowa's rate. 98% of our enrolled children are currently insured. Of these children, 90.4% are covered by Medicaid or Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP)/Hawk-I. Head Starts Family Resource Specialists work closely with our families when they are accepted into our program to aid in the families acquiring of insurance such as Medicaid or Hawk-I, as well as other necessary resources for their family.



Source: Kids COUNT - Uninsured Children in Iowa

Food Assistance

The percentage of individuals within our five counties benefiting from the Food Assistance program has been gradually decreasing since 2020 with the exception of Wayne County which saw a slight increase in 2022 before a decrease in 2023.



Source: Kids COUNT – Food Assistance in Iowa

Most of our children receive free or reduced lunches upon entering the public schools. In the districts that we serve, the percentage of free lunches fell in a few districts causing a -2.8% change in the total averages. Although, our percentage of free lunch recipients went down, the percentage of students that are on free lunch is still 11.1% greater than the State of Iowa's average.

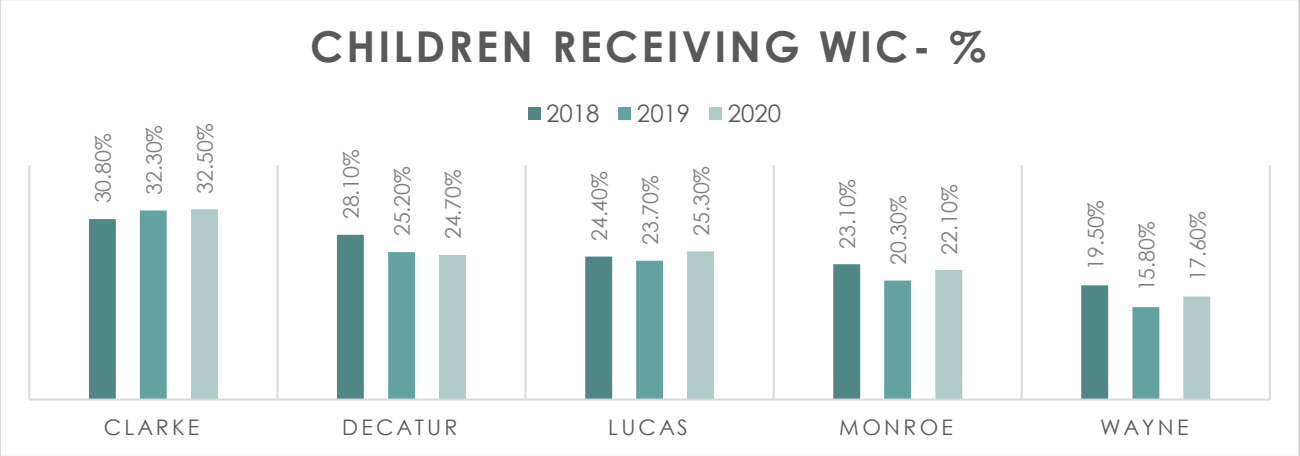
Free and Reduced Lunches by School District

School District	*2023-2024*	*2024-2025*	*% Change*
Albia	38.2%	38.8%	+0.6%
Central Decatur	70.1%	63.7%	-6.4%
Chariton	55.0%	58.5%	+3.5%
Clarke	57.2%	57.3%	+0.1%
Lamoni	61.8%	53.7%	-8.1%
Mormon Trail	63.6%	56.1%	-7.5%
Murray	48.1%	45.2%	-2.9%
Wayne	55.2%	53.3%	-1.9%
District Average	**56.2%**	**53.3%**	**-2.8%**
State of Iowa	**41.8%**	**42.2%**	**+0.4%**

Source: Iowa Department of Education – Free and Reduced-Price Lunch (FRL) By District

Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)

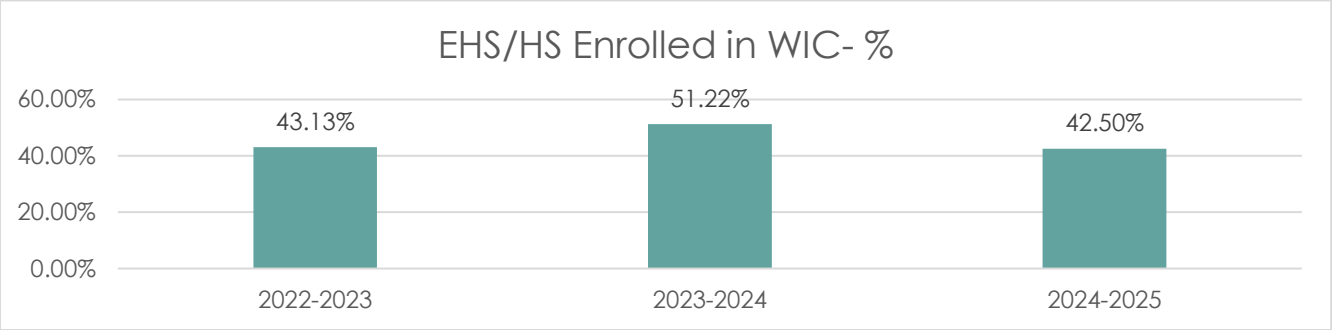
WIC is a Federal nutrition program for low-income women (pregnant or breastfeeding) with infants and/or children under the age of five. This program aids families in ensuring that they are receiving proper nutrition during the most vital times in their life. According to Kids COUNT, the number of children enrolled in WIC has been steadily declining until 2020 which saw a slight increase in all counties except Decatur.



Source: Kids COUNT – Children Receiving WIC in Iowa

South Central Iowa Community Action Program

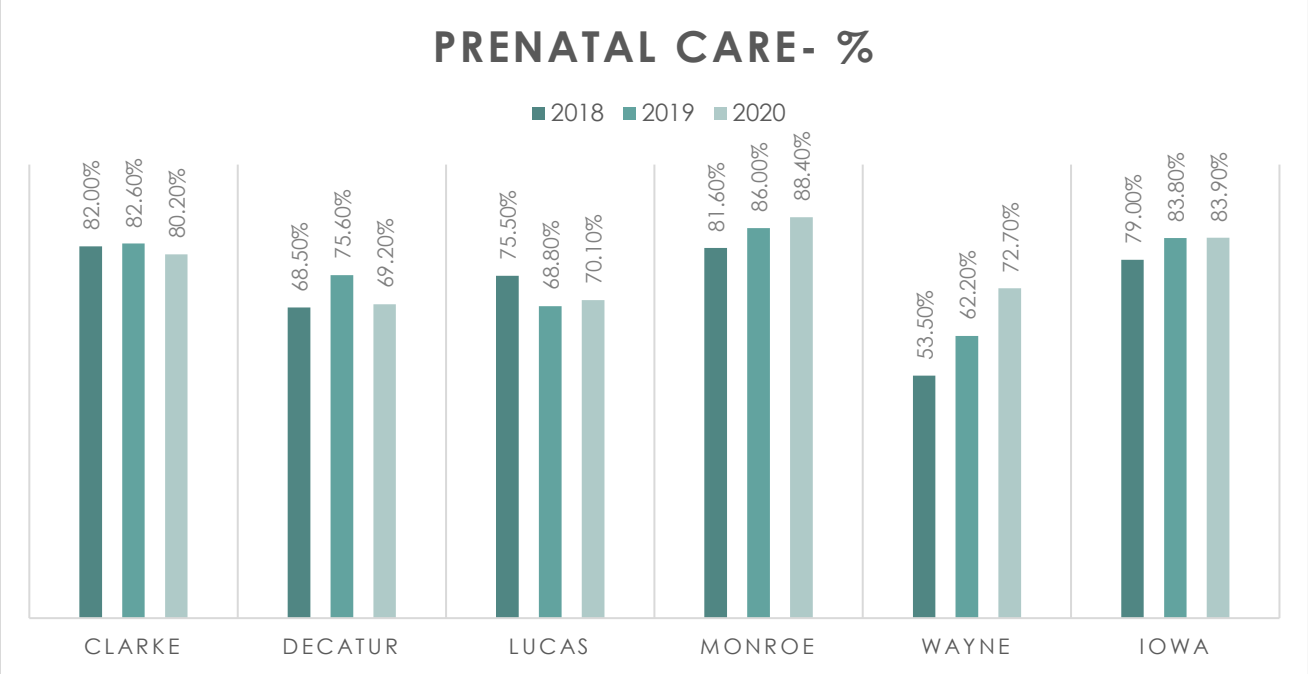
The number of children within our programs that are enrolled in WIC risen by 6.7% between the last two years. Making certain that our families are enrolled within this federal nutrition program safeguards the health of our students and their families.



Source: SCICAP-ECP ChildPlus Data

Prenatal Care

Prenatal care is imperative throughout a woman's pregnancy to ensure the health and well-being of the mother and their newborn baby. In our service area, the 2020 average of mothers receiving prenatal care is 76.1%. Our 2020 average is 7.8% below the State of Iowa's average of mothers receiving prenatal care.



Source: Kids COUNT - Prenatal Care in Iowa

Teen Unmarried Births

The quantity of unmarried teen mothers in our service area is scarce compared to the State of Iowa. According to Kids COUNT, there were less than five incidences in all five of our counties in 2018. The State of Iowa's 2020 average was 1.3%.

Teen Unmarried Births

County	2018	2019	2020
Clarke County	*	2.9%	3.2%
Decatur County	*	*	*
Lucas County	*	*	*
Monroe County	*	3.6%	2.3%
Wayne County	*	*	*

** Rate is not available as incidences of Five or less have been suppressed to protect confidentiality.*

Source: Kids COUNT – Teen Unmarried Births in Iowa

Summary

SCICAP-ECP serves a rural area that is comprised of some of the poorest counties in the State of Iowa. The populations are decreasing slightly in some counties; however, the poverty rates are remaining higher than the State of Iowa's poverty rate. With the higher poverty rates and an increase of unemployment came an increase of families using federally funded programs such as WIC, Medicaid, food assistance, etc.

For families with children to be able to go to work childcare is a necessity. The absence of childcare within our service area affects not only the children, but also the family's income rate. If there is not childcare easily accessible, it is difficult for our families to be able to go to work to gain financial dependence. Our five-county areas are continuing to have limited childcare access for low-income families.

Strengths

Family and community strengths: Our EHS and HS programs are situated in rural communities where neighbors support one another. Teachers work with

multiple children from the same family and stay connected with families as children get older. In addition, EHS and HS families refer one another to the program, thereby supporting enrollment. Families, many of whom are deeply invested in their children's learning and development, find opportunities to engage with their EHS and HS programs to learn from their children's teachers. Our programs are located in communities that have resources available that are supported by SCICAP-ECP and other social service agencies.

Program strengths: EHS and HS teachers along with their staff are key strengths of the program. In addition to promoting kindergarten readiness, our EHS and HS programs also offer supportive services to children and families, including health screenings, nutritional support and services for children while connecting families with resources to assist with housing and employment, for example.

Systems-level strengths: Local agencies that serve families and children share strong coordination related to referrals. This facilitates information sharing with family consent and ensures that families are connected with the resources they need. MOU's are in place with AEA agencies, school districts and county public health agencies.

Recommendations

As we move into our final year of our five-year grant for the 2026-2027 school year, we will be considering the option of converting some Head Start slots to Early Head Start center-based slots or reducing Head Start capacity to increase staff compensation. We are currently waiting to see how enrollment numbers are in the upcoming school year before making this determination. However, we do recognize the potential need for more infant and toddler care to meet the needs of working families.

We will be consistently monitoring and assessing the program and family needs to identify new areas for support during the current economic environment.

Teachers have expressed that they are experiencing increased behavioral challenges in the classroom. SCICAP-ECP will continue to offer additional training and professional development opportunities for our staff that is focused on trauma and behavioral challenges.

Sources:

Iowa Department of Education

Iowa DHS Child Care Provider Portal

Iowa Policy Project

Kids COUNT

SCICAP ChildPlus Data

SCICAP Daycare Surveys

U.S Census Bureau