

Muscatine County Community Needs Assessment: Executive Summary



The following 5 partners provided guidance and funding:



Muscatine Community School District
Muscatine County Community Services

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Muscatine County - Cautiously Optimistic

In 2014, the United Way of Muscatine County hired an independent research firm to conduct a community assessment that gathered input from community leaders, social services providers and people living in the county. In all, 582 people participated. The study's margin of sample error is $\pm 4.02\%$. The complete results are available in the full study report as well as a comparison to data from a 2008 assessment. Following is a summary of the insights gained and key data points.

The 1,000-foot view shows growth and resident support.

People living and working in Muscatine County appreciate and support their home. Unlike two-thirds of Iowa counties, Muscatine County grew in population over the last decade.

Community leaders are committed, engaged and can easily describe the county's many assets.

"Since moving here seven years ago, I would say (things are) getting better."

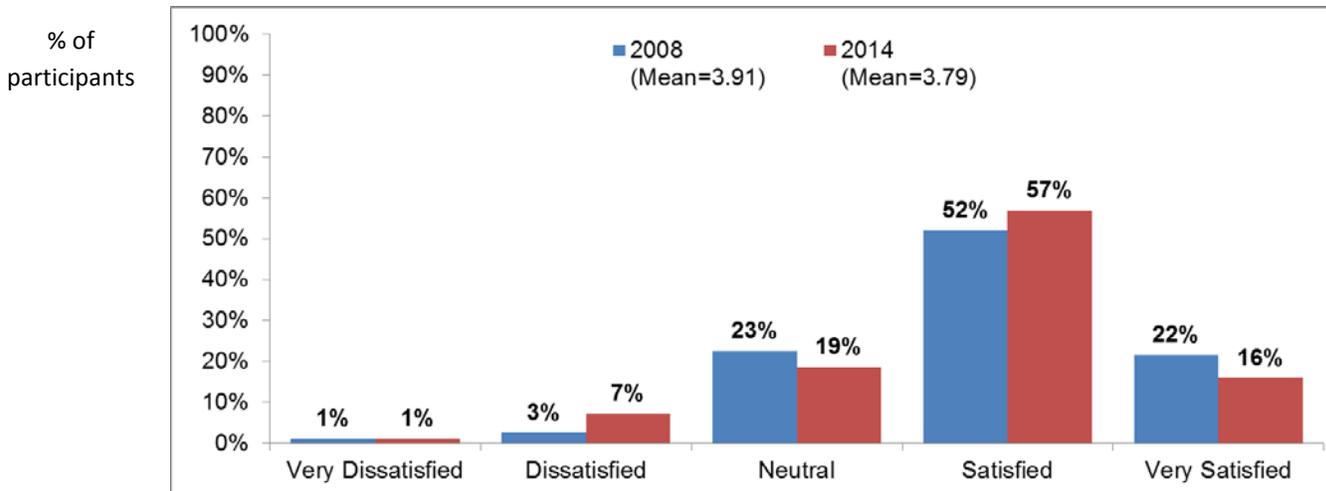
"It's a small town with a large corporate base. The jobs available in this community are good."

"There's a ton of folks willing to volunteer in the community."

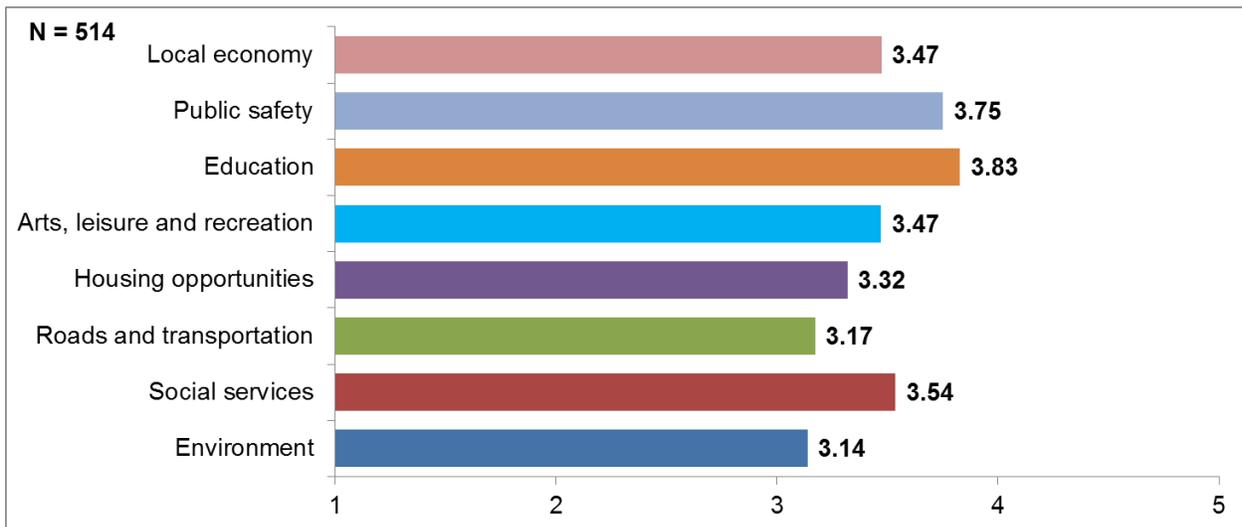
"The natural resources, the recreation in the community with the river, parks and trails."

"It's a great place to live, raise a family, there's a ton to do here."

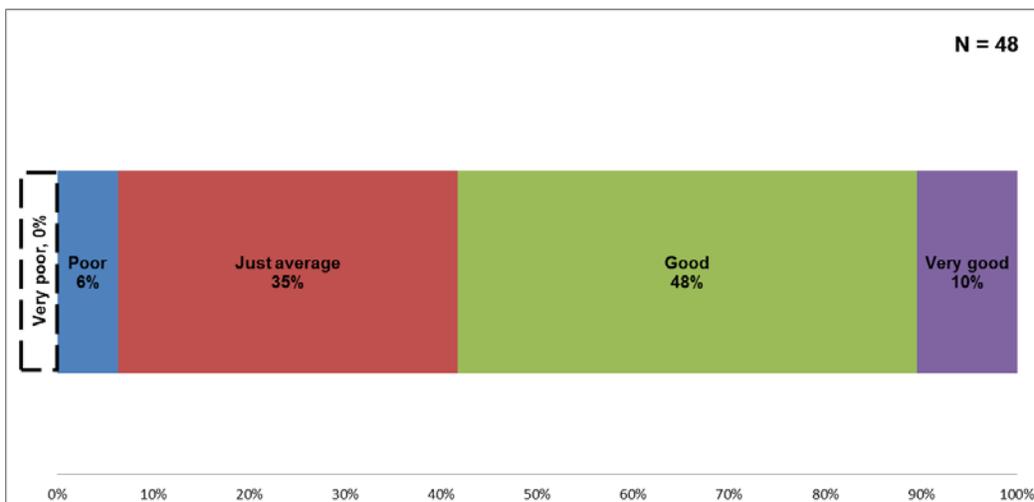
Residents expressed satisfaction with the overall quality-of-life in the county, although there has been some minor decrease (but not statistically significant) since the 2008 overall ratings. In addition, most of the 58 community attributes were rated at the same level or slightly below the 2008 level for satisfaction.



Even though all areas of community life are in the satisfaction range (3 is the neutral point), there is room for improvement.



Service providers also perceived Muscatine County as providing an average to good quality-of-life.



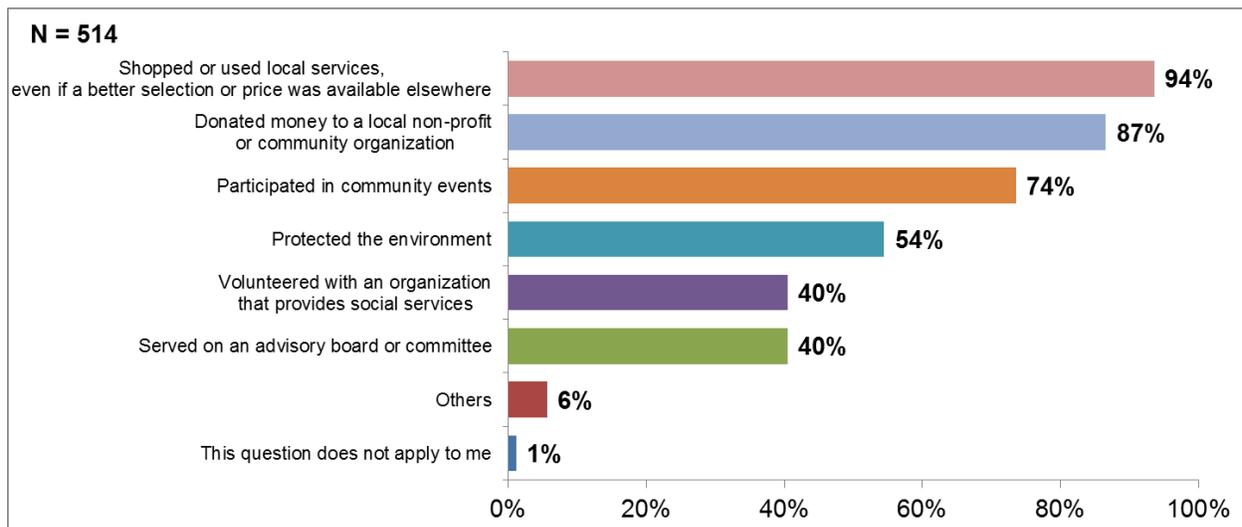
While there is an overall sense of things being generally good in the county, participants were uncertain about the future. When asked if they agreed that the overall quality of life in Muscatine County will improve in the next five years, the mean response by residents was just slightly over neutral (3.14), which indicates uncertainty.

Residents were also able to articulate areas that need attention, have seen decline or may have a gap in services. Some of those points are included in the topical headings further on in this summary. In addition, some participants noted the existence of stereotypes that Muscatine County is an industrial rivertown area or that it doesn't provide entertainment for younger adults.

When asked what the county's biggest problem was, the following categories of responses were most common:

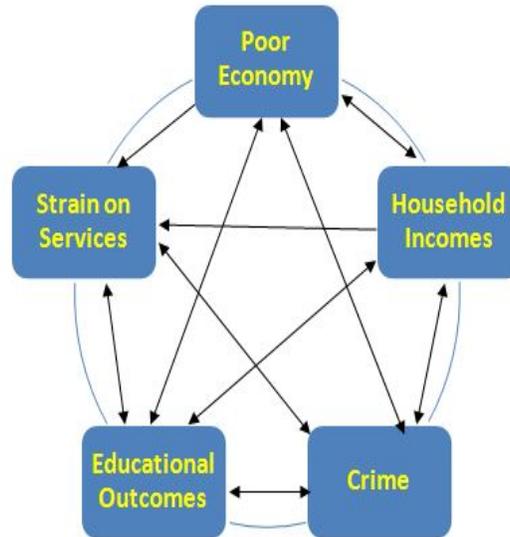
Characteristic	Frequency (n=514)
Lack of good jobs/employment, unemployment and underemployment	113
Air quality	63
Lack of shopping/dining/entertainment/culture	60
Lack of affordable housing (for low-income families or others)	43
High crime rate/neighborhoods don't feel safe	40
Low community involvement/cohesiveness	33
New/existing businesses receive little/no help	29
Poor economy/lack of growth	24
Nothing attracting/keeping young professionals in the area	21
Gang violence/activity	20
Lack of mental health services	20
Declining education system	19
High dropout rate	16
High poverty rate	16

Behavior, however, is even more important than perception. Study participants reported many activities that demonstrate support of their community, including volunteering and using local businesses.



People understand that a community's well-being is complex - everything is interrelated.

Whether you are looking at an individual family or an entire community, study participants recognized that many factors affect each other and contribute to the health of the whole. Comments by community leaders, service providers and residents underscored these relationships.



More community members need to be involved more often in determining the county's future.

Several indicators in the study led to this observation. When residents were asked about the one single thing the community could do to better serve their needs, the second most frequent answer was improving community engagement, collaboration or involvement. Another popular response was for community leaders to listen to citizens.

The study's Kano analysis revealed several community attributes in this area that were flagged for attention (yellow is top priority, orange is secondary) and drive overall satisfaction:

People from different parts of the community routinely participate in conversations and decisions about important community issues

Community leaders understand the needs of all residents, not just certain groups

Community leaders are active and engaged with citizens

All three of these community attributes were rated high in importance – from 4.35 to 4.54 on a 5-point scale.

Community leaders themselves see the need to engage more people and to include a more diverse range of people in planning.

“I’m not sure if the city program includes people of different economic status. It just includes people who are leaders in the community – there are a lot of voiceless people.”

“I’m not aware that those populations (minorities) are represented in leadership. I think they have a token invitation but it’s hard to break through.”

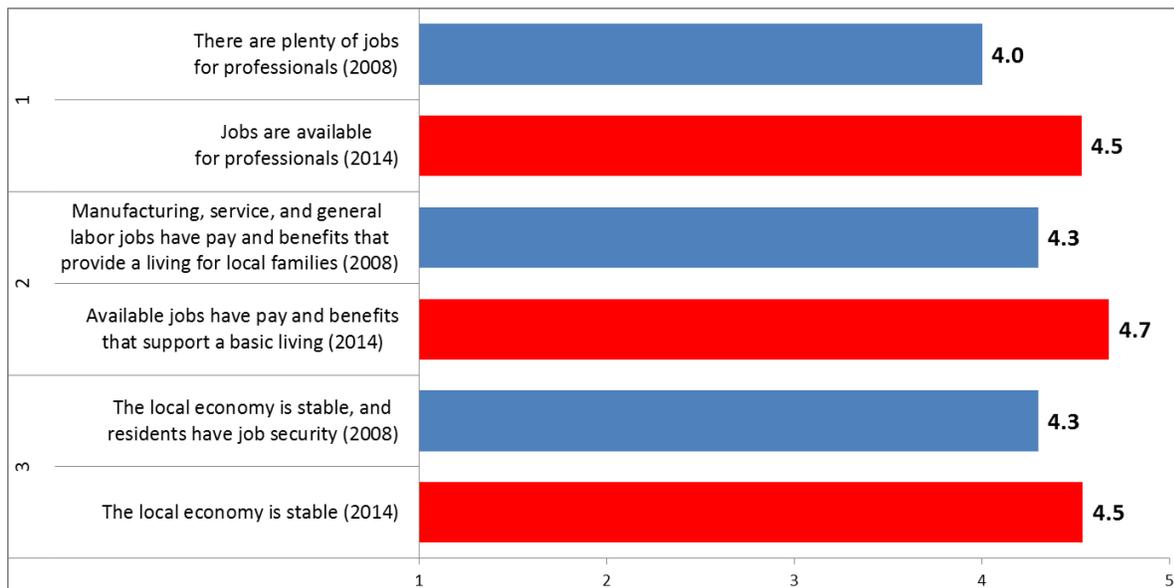
“I’d like to see more minorities get involved so they can speak for those groups.”

“Everybody is in their own groups and there isn’t mingling between them.”

“It’s the economy, stupid.”

The famous and successful campaign strategy for Bill Clinton’s 1992 presidential campaign also summarizes the core of many of the main concerns and opportunities people see for Muscatine County moving forward. Study participants want to see more focus on quality, higher-paying jobs, efforts to maintain and attract good businesses, improvements to the mall retail area and support for entrepreneurs.

Economic issues have become even more important to residents. The importance ratings they gave in 2014 saw an increase over 2008.



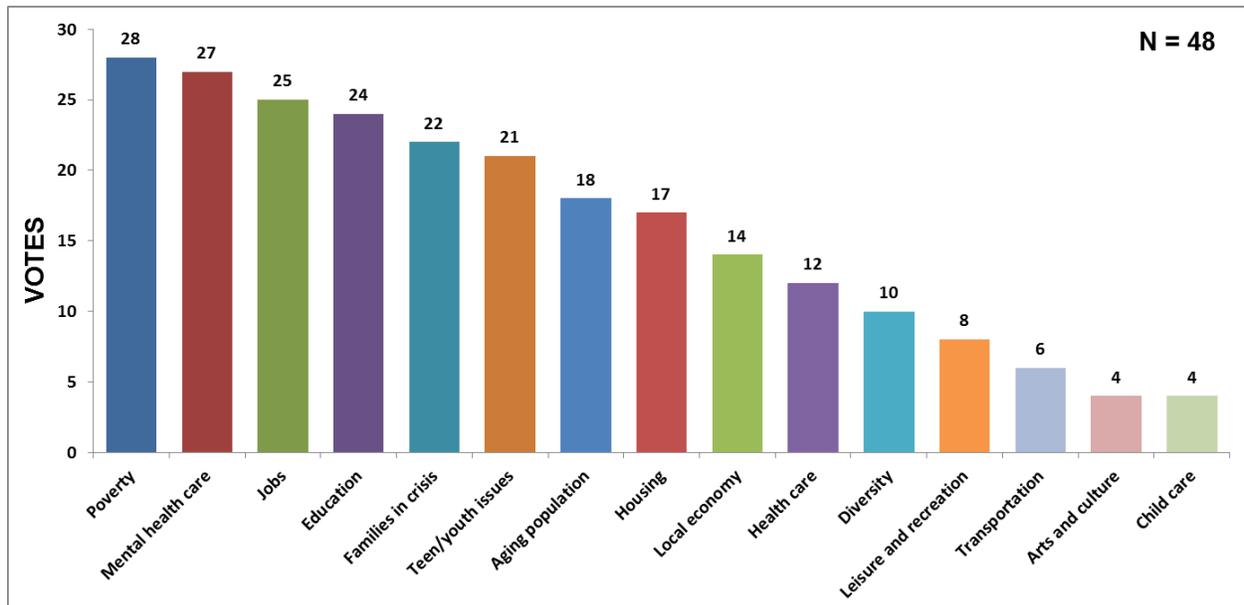
In the Kano analysis, satisfaction with the community’s economy had the highest correlation to overall satisfaction and it also posted the second largest gap in satisfaction.

Community Attribute	Mean importance	Mean satisfaction	Gap	Statistical significance
Local economy	4.57	3.47	1.10	YES

Available jobs offering pay and benefits that support a basic living was flagged as the primary area of focus. Secondary areas were: stable economy, job security and jobs for professionals. Two economic areas also had gaps in satisfaction but weren't flagged because they don't have a high correlation with overall satisfaction with the community – a successful downtown and support for people starting new businesses.

Lack of good jobs, unemployment and underemployment were the top issues mentioned by residents when asked, "What is the biggest problem your community faces in terms of quality-of-life for residents?"

When county service providers were asked what would improve the quality-of-life, increasing the number of jobs with decent pay and benefits was the second-most-often-mentioned suggestion. And when asked what they saw as the biggest challenges facing the county today, two of the top three answers were jobs and poverty:



Interviews with community leaders also supported the emphasis on the economy. Their perceptions and priorities included:

- ▼ Top issue is low-paying jobs, including low wages or unstable temporary positions
- ▼ Need for initiatives in retail/commercial – both developing new and supporting existing – were noted by several participants
- ▼ Other mentions included a better-skilled workforce, cultivating entrepreneurs and the disparity between Muscatine and other towns in the county

“Wages are below the cost of living. In Muscatine, the living wage is supposed to be \$24.32 an hour for an adult with two kids. Most people are way below.”

“For the amount of industry we have, there is too much unemployment.”

“Great communities start with great homes and you can’t have a great home if you are struggling financially.”

“West Liberty and other communities outside Muscatine really get (hurt) by that because a company can go a mile north to Cedar County and get the same economic development aid and pay \$7-\$8 less.”

Does reality match perception on the wage issue? According to data collected by Iowa State University (ISU), the average job in Muscatine County yields higher earnings for workers than the state average. However, this was flagged as an area of **caution** in the ISU report. In addition, the highest-reported incidences of adverse conditions by Muscatine County residents (e.g., couldn’t afford health care) in the study can be directly linked to lack of funds.

Education is a point of pride but more students need to benefit .

The community’s education-related attributes were mostly rated high by study participants. Providers said services promoting education were the most important. It was given the top priority for future focus by community leaders. Many comments in the study noted the connection between education, employment, crime and stable families.

Education posted the best overall satisfaction rating by residents. Looking deeper into the county’s educational aspects, the areas with more satisfaction (3.5 or higher on 5-point scale) included:

- ▼ Quality of educational buildings and facilities
- ▼ Quality of teachers in public schools
- ▼ Presence of opportunities for college and vocational training programs
- ▼ Children are prepared to enter elementary school

Those areas with relatively lower satisfaction were:

- ▼ Public school class size
- ▼ Relevance of local training programs to job market
- ▼ Students are prepared for college or additional training (This has the highest correlation to overall satisfaction of all education attributes.)
- ▼ Students are prepared to enter workforce
- ▼ High school dropout rate (This was the only educational attribute that had a mean rating in the dissatisfaction range and a gap between importance and satisfaction that was large and significant.)

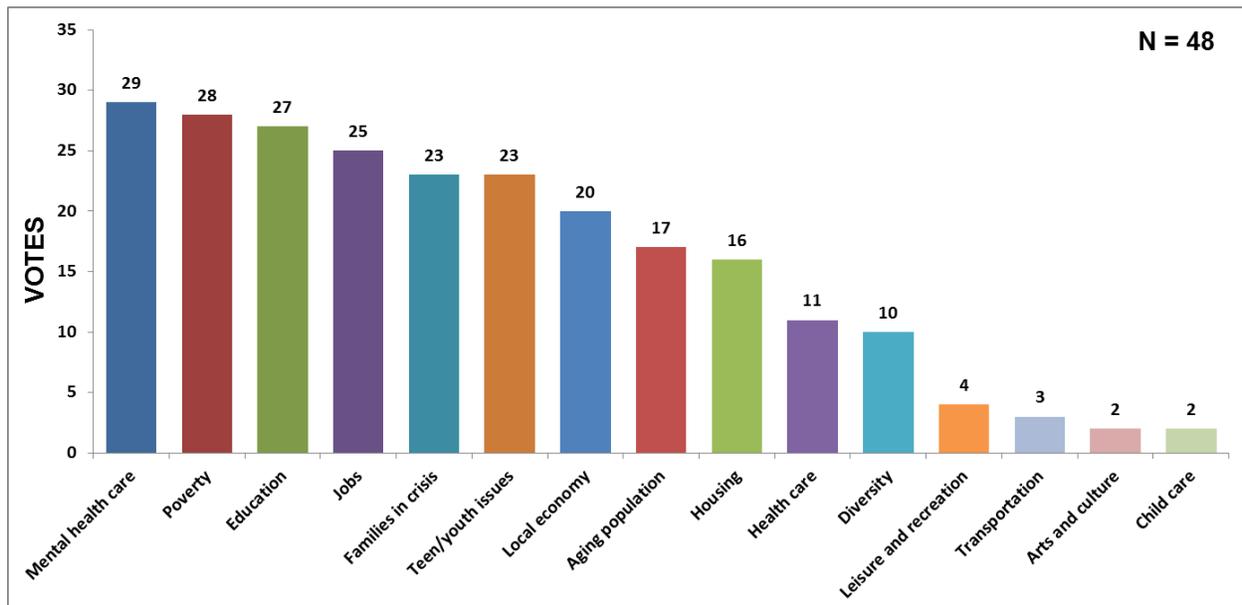
The concern over the graduation or dropout rate also surfaced in many community leaders' comments. More than a third said it was the biggest problem facing K-12 education, but some did say things were already improving.

"There's too high of a dropout rate...Some of it is generational poverty. (We) now have an alternative high school to help."

"If you don't have people graduating from high school, people won't have a chance to do more than a minimum-wage job."

"Education is the key – if you don't get at least a high school education, you're setting yourself up for some issues in life."

Service providers see education as the third biggest challenge in the next few years:



(Top challenges in next 3 to 5 years)

Beyond increasing graduation rates and preparing students for college or the workforce, people want to see more students receive the type of training that qualifies them for positions in the area. Community leaders also mentioned wanting higher quality in curriculum and teaching, as well as expanding access to quality preschool.

"We don't focus enough on those kids who aren't going to two-year or four-year college, so technical education, there are jobs that need people with technical skills."

"Tailor the curriculum at community college to meet local industry needs."

"It's a huge concern (preschool). We need more of it for low-income kids. They aren't ready to hit school."

"Access to AP programs, college-level courses..."

The Kano analysis provides some additional insight on priority educational areas. The yellow are top priorities, orange are secondary. The correlation to overall satisfaction is taken into account for highlighting (that information is not seen in this chart).

Attribute	Importance	Satisfaction	Gap	Statistically Significant?
Students are prepared to attend college or additional training after high school	4.66	3.36	1.30	Yes
Teacher quality in the public schools is good	4.71	3.64	1.06	Yes
Good educational buildings and facilities (schools, athletic facilities, libraries, etc.)	4.53	3.93	0.60	Yes
Students are prepared to enter the workforce after graduation from high school	4.50	3.33	1.17	Yes
Training programs are relevant to the local job market	4.51	3.43	1.08	Yes
College opportunities exist in the area	4.41	3.89	0.52	Yes
High school dropout rate is low	4.47	2.83	1.64	Yes
Class sizes in the public schools are reasonable	4.43	3.43	1.00	Yes
Vocational training opportunities exist in the area (electrician, welding, certified nursing assistant, etc.)	4.49	3.60	0.90	Yes
Children are prepared to enter elementary school by age five	4.46	3.61	0.85	Yes

Do facts match up with perception on the dropout rate issue? Looking at the county, there are some differences in dropout rates by district. The State Department of Education lists the 2012-13 rates as follows:

Muscatine - 5.3% West Liberty - 2.6% Wilton = 2.1%

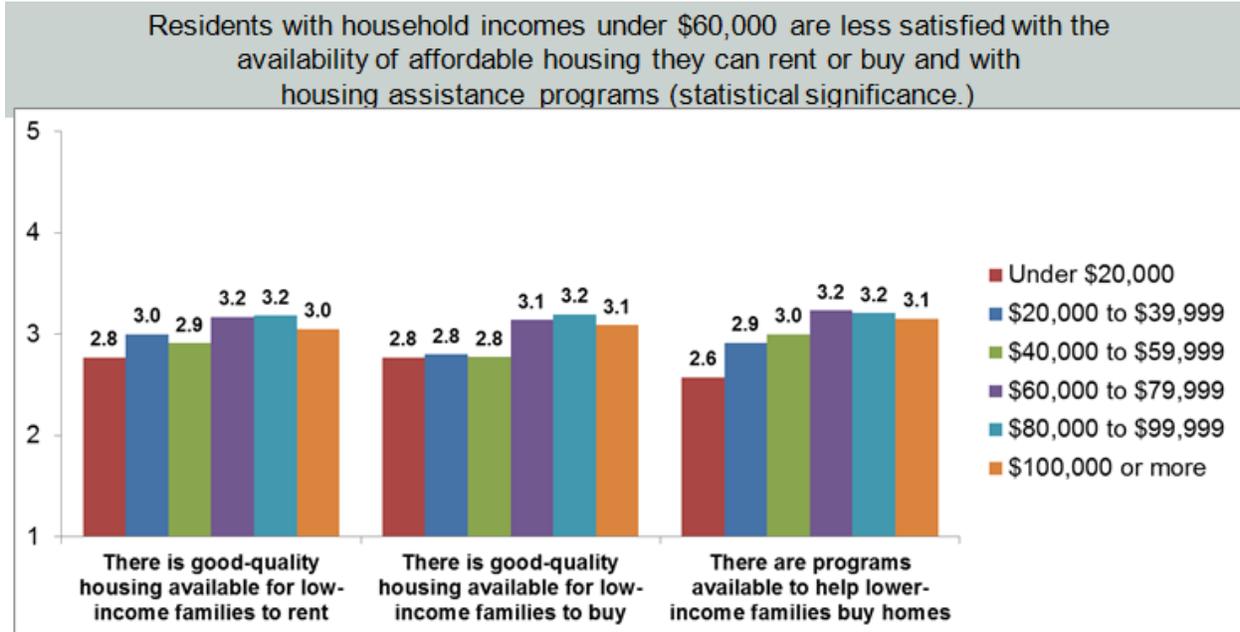
In comparing these Muscatine County school district dropout rates to districts with similar size high school enrollments and similar types of communities, it appears that Muscatine is typical, if not slightly better, on this measurement – but, of course, that doesn't mean it doesn't deserve high priority:

Clinton - 6.7% Burlington - 3.5% Fort Dodge - 7.2% Marshalltown - 7.5%

Affordable quality housing is a growing issue.

The lack of quality affordable housing was mentioned by all groups providing feedback in the study.

- ▼ The lack of affordable housing to rent or purchase was flagged as an area of **concern** in the ISU Indicators Report
- ▼ Lack of affordable housing was one of the more frequently-mentioned responses (in top 5) when residents were asked to name the biggest problem in the county
- ▼ Resident satisfaction for all housing factors dropped from 2008 (there was a minor word change in the question that may have affected the ratings)
- ▼ Affordable housing for low-income families to rent or buy has a strong correlation to overall satisfaction with community



Community leaders also see the problem:

“No new affordable housing has been built in over 20 years, and housing stock is in very poor shape. There’s a need for every type of housing you can think of.”

“It’s hard for young professionals to find affordable apartments of quality.”

“There’s a sufficient number of middle-income housing, but there’s never enough low-income housing - \$50,000 to \$100,000.”

Like many communities in Iowa, there hasn't been a significant investment in new housing since the 1970s and 80s, and a third of the stock is at least 75 years old. Below is county housing data from 2009; it most likely hasn't changed much due to the housing crisis which dried up new developments.

Age of homes in Muscatine County (citymelt.com)

Built 2005 or later : 278
Built 2000 to 2004 : 1,050
Built 1990 to 1999 : 1,773
Built 1980 to 1989 : 1,654
Built 1970 to 1979 : 2,801
Built 1960 to 1969 : 1,673
Built 1950 to 1959 : 1,253
Built 1940 to 1949 : 1,013
Built 1939 or earlier : 6,373

Satisfaction ratings with public safety are stable with some concern over high-crime neighborhoods.

Public safety is always one of the top priorities of any community's residents and leaders. Along with education, it received the highest importance ratings by Muscatine County residents. Community leaders gave it the second highest priority (along with employment) for future focus.

- ▼ Crime issues (unsafe neighborhoods, gang activity) were noted somewhat often in residents' comments regarding the community's biggest problem
- ▼ All of the public safety attributes had gaps between importance and satisfaction, BUT satisfaction rates have remained stable since 2008
- ▼ Gang activity, substance abuse issues and domestic abuse were noted as key public safety concerns

Community leaders voiced the same concerns, although almost a third didn't think there were significant public safety issues.

"I like what the police have done in the community recently. I would love to see more police officers walking a beat so people get to know them."

"If we don't work on some of the gang and drug issues, it could develop that core, inner part of the town could just be taken over by these activities."

"Domestic violence – we need to get a handle on that. We need for people to feel safe in their homes."

Mental health/substance abuse/crisis services are lacking.

Mental health services (the lack of) came up frequently throughout the study, not just in reference to specific questions about these types of services, but also in comments regarding public safety, health care, social services and government services.

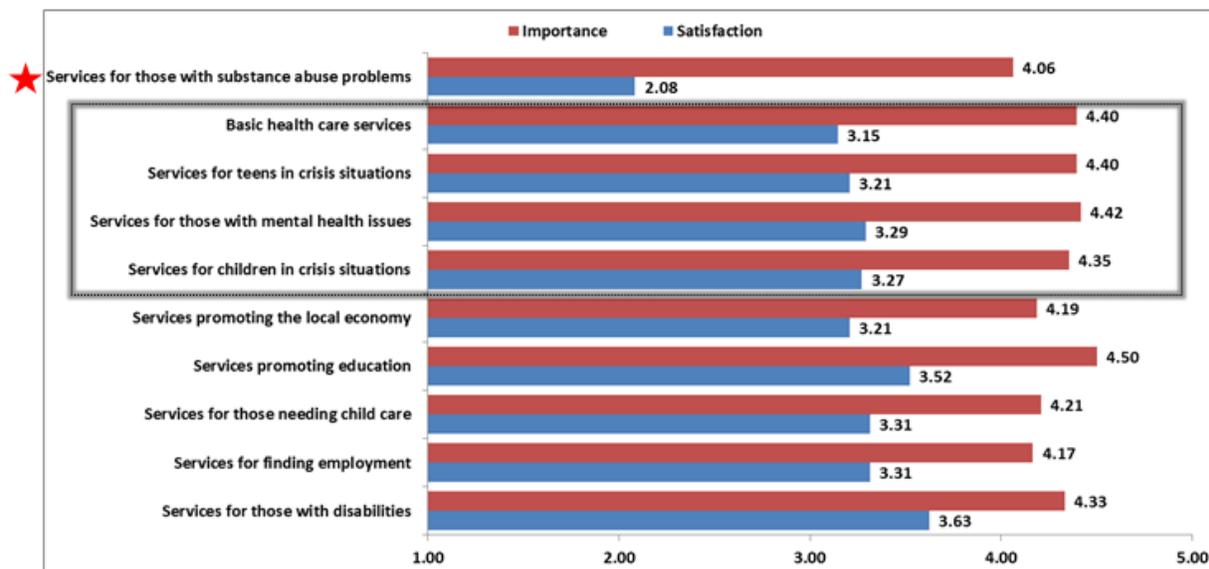
“We don’t have a mental health center, we have very few counseling agencies, we don’t have a psychiatrist in the area. We don’t have a very good handle on mental health care at all.”

“These folks just exist, their children just exist with them and it pulls the quality of life of the community down. There’s homelessness and domestic violence.”

“When someone has a crisis, to find a mental health bed they sometimes have to go across the state. The jail houses some people with mental illness as well.”

Service providers in the county see significant gaps in services for people with substance abuse issues, mental health issues and young people in crisis.

Services for those with substance abuse problems showed the largest gap between attribute performance and provider satisfaction. Four other attributes showed a gap of a full point or larger.



When asked to list the biggest challenges for the county in the next five years, providers gave mental health the top spot and families and youth in crisis situations as fifth and sixth, respectively.

Residents also believe there are unmet needs. Several types of social services were flagged in the Kano analysis, with mental health and crisis services emerging as the major opportunities for improvement.

Attribute	Importance	Satisfaction	Gap	Statistically Significant?
Adequate resources available for children in crisis situations	4.52	3.18	1.33	Yes
Adequate resources available for families in crisis situations	4.39	3.16	1.23	Yes
Services and/or resources for those with mental health issues	4.36	3.02	1.34	Yes
Affordable quality child care	4.46	3.29	1.17	Yes
The community has enough primary care providers (family practice doctors, dentists, etc.) to serve the population	4.61	3.53	1.09	Yes
Services and/or resources for those with disabilities	4.42	3.45	0.97	Yes
Services and/or resources for the elderly	4.47	3.50	0.96	Yes
Services and/or resources for those with substance abuse problems	4.16	3.26	0.90	Yes

People do have a need for these services. For example, when study participants were asked what adverse experiences they or a member of their household have experienced in the last two years, 10% reported having trouble finding mental health care services. That translates to more than 3,000 people.

Air quality continues to have a poor image – new EPA plan in place.

Improving the air quality was in the top five suggestions from residents, reflecting its importance to people and its correlation with overall satisfaction. Air quality had the second lowest satisfaction rating of all 58 attributes and the largest gap between importance and satisfaction.

Attribute	Mean importance	Mean satisfaction	Gap
The community has clean air	4.61	2.60	2.02

The ISU Indicators Report also warned that this was an area of **concern** for Muscatine County. Community leaders recognize the issue. While some believe that progress has been made and continues to be made, others want more improvement and foresee serious consequences if air quality is not addressed.

“People will continue to choose not to live in Muscatine. They may work here but not live here.”

“We’re going to have some big-time lawsuits. People won’t move to town because of the air quality.”

“Air quality will continue to deteriorate, and that can lead to businesses paying fines and moving out.”

This December, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) approved Iowa’s state implementation plan (SIP) to reduce fine particle emissions in Muscatine County. Emission reduction strategies at three facilities (Muscatine Power and Water, Union Tank Car and Grain Processing Corporation) will reduce almost 600 tons of fine particles. At Grain Processing Corporation, the strategies will also reduce other pollutants, such as hazardous air pollutants, by 82 percent. The SIP will achieve continued attainment of the 2006 PM2.5 National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) and result in improved air quality for the residents of Muscatine, Iowa.

Overall, people are satisfied with transportation.

Relative to other community aspects we investigated, the transportation areas appear to mostly be meeting basic needs. The transportation aspects don’t correlate much with overall satisfaction and have small or no importance-satisfaction gaps, with the exception of road maintenance (which is an issue in almost every community in Iowa).

Community attribute	Mean importance	Mean satisfaction	Gap
Public roads are well-maintained	4.44	2.99	1.45

Safe busing options and buses that make stops where people need the service were two additional areas highlighted for focus (smaller importance-satisfaction gaps).

*(did we have a cut for income?)

Arts, leisure and recreation – give us more!

People appreciated the number and variety of programs and events available to them. Residents, especially in the area of shopping, dining and other entertainment, would like to see even more.

Community leaders recognized the recreational assets unique to the county and also noted the quality of city recreational programs. A few wanted to see more activities for lower-income families and youth and want better communication so more people are aware of what is available.

“It’s pretty amazing – youth sports, high school activities, symphony, nice theater, nice restaurants.”

“There are plenty of activities. It’s more of a marketing and communication issue – how do we get people engaged and involved in the resources we already have?”

Residents seemed to have more desire for additional options. When asked to describe the community's biggest problems, lack of dining/shopping/entertainment was the third most frequently mentioned category (after economy and air quality). In a follow-up question asking what one thing the county could do to improve, suggestions about the mall, dining and entertainment were common responses. In the Kano analysis, you can see residents' dissatisfaction with this aspect.

Community attribute	Mean importance	Mean satisfaction	Gap
Quality shopping (good malls, boutiques, etc.)	4.23	2.29	1.94

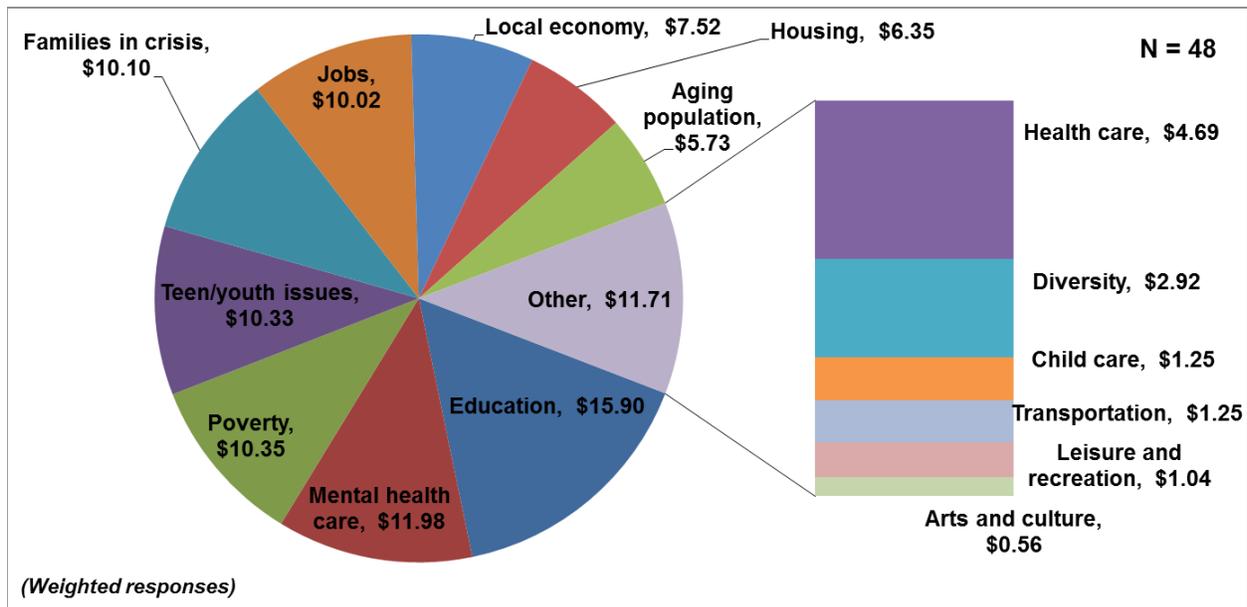
Leaders, providers and residents agree on most of the priorities for the county's future.

There is alignment on which aspects of the county's quality-of-life should be the main focus for future initiatives and investments. Residents, community leaders and service providers all identified educational and training opportunities, employment and economic development improvements, affordable quality housing and enhanced services for those in need as the three focal points to a better future for Muscatine County. In addition, affordable housing and more local shopping/entertainment (and other types of businesses and services) emerged as top needs.

Below are resident responses to the question, "In your opinion, what is the single most important thing your community could do to serve the needs of residents?"

Characteristic	Frequency (n=514)
Promote/attract new business to decrease trips to Iowa City/Quad Cities	51
Improve community engagement, involvement and collaboration	45
Either revitalize, get rid of or build a new mall	39
More services for people in need (mental health, especially)	33
Improve air quality	30
Community leaders should listen to what the citizens have to say	29
Create more jobs	29
Create more opportunities for higher education	26
Improve dining and entertainment options	26
Improve wages	17
Provide an attractive atmosphere for young professionals/middle class	17
Better education about services for people in need	16

How service providers said they would allocate \$100 in budget to various areas.



How community leaders responded when asked what they thought the top priority areas should be for the future of the county:

- ▼ Education – 12 mentions (school readiness, curriculum, student performance, graduation rates, mentoring)
- ▼ Public safety – 5 mentions (reduce crime/domestic violence)
- ▼ Employment – 5 mentions (jobs, wages, trained workforce)
- ▼ Recreation – 4 mentions (trails and parks)
- ▼ Public services – 4 mentions (updating infrastructure)
- ▼ Economic development – 4 mentions (industry diversity, revitalization of downtown and riverfront)
- ▼ Housing – 4 mentions (affordable, quality housing)

Recommendations

The data and insights gained from the 2014 Muscatine County Assessment lead us to the conclusion that the county has many assets, an involved group of citizens and leaders and potential to make the county an even better place to live, work and raise a family.

How do you realize this greater potential? It must happen from both the top down and the grassroots up. Lasting and meaningful change will take place if you utilize a formal, collaborative and publicized process that includes the following:

- ▼ Gain commitment from key organizations and leaders in the county – government, non-profit, corporate, education, etc.
- ▼ Invite and facilitate participation from all aspects of the community, including representatives of minorities, young adults, low-income households and those living in the county's smaller towns and rural areas
- ▼ Reach consensus on the initiative's key focus areas, using the 2014 Community Needs Assessment as a guide, and considering resources available through public and private sources
- ▼ Create a name for the initiative; this helps people identify and reference - for example, Cedar Rapids had a Fifteen in Five effort for a prior community projects effort, perhaps something like Muscatine County 2025
- ▼ Develop specific goals for 5 and 10 years out and precise measurements to gauge success and put in place a format and process for an annual review of progress
- ▼ Identify organizations and people who will commit to specific goals or parts of goals – detail roles, responsibilities, timelines and resources in an action plan
- ▼ Be transparent in communications regarding goals, participating citizens and organizations, progress made, obstacles encountered, etc. and publicize the plan and progress through multiple channels
- ▼ Encourage organizations to include the county plan's goals in their own internal strategic plans
- ▼ Celebrate the kick-off and subsequent progress with community-wide events

Some good sources for information on effective public engagement and community planning include:

International Association of Public Participation, specifically their annual Core Value Award winners document that details successful programs - http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.iap2.org/resource/resmgr/Core_Values/2013_IAP2_Federation_Core_Va.pdf

National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation, extensive articles, links and blog posts on community engagement - <http://ncdd.org/?s=public+engagement>

The Federal Highway Administration (links to many community engagement articles and resources) - http://www.planning.dot.gov/focus_publicEngage.asp

Institute for Local Government - <http://www.ca-ilg.org/public-engagement>