2026

Mississippi's Risk & Reach Report

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHILDREN, YOUTH, & COMMUNITIES

MISSISSIPPI kids count

CHILDREN'S FOUNDATION OF MISSISSIPPI

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The Children's Foundation of Mississippi believes that for Mississippi to reach its full potential, our children must first reach theirs.

When children are given a strong start and have access to the resources and opportunities they need to learn and grow, they thrive like flowers.

Strong data should serve as the foundation for making the best decisions we can to positively impact children. As the home of the Mississippi KIDS COUNT data center, the Children's Foundation of Mississippi aims to place data in the hands of decision-makers, policy-makers, and leaders at the local and state levels. KIDS COUNT indicators capture what children and youth need most across four domains: (1) Economic Well-Being, (2) Education, (3) Health and (4) Family and Community, with four indicators within each domain. You'll learn more about these in the pages to follow.

This Risk and Reach report serves as a follow up to the inaugural report completed in 2021 by the Children's Foundation of Mississippi in partnership with the Social Science Research Center at Mississippi State University. This edition both replicates and builds upon that original work. Much of the data included in the 2021 report reflected pre-pandemic conditions, making it especially important to examine both progress and ongoing challenges in a post-pandemic context as we continue to prioritize the needs of children and youth, who represent the future of our state and nation.

The Risk and Reach framework remains particularly meaningful. Understanding the needs, or "risks," facing children, youth, and their families, alongside the opportunities and resources, or the "reach," available to support them, is central to our work at the Children's Foundation of Mississippi. As our organization continues to grow, we remain committed to using data to facilitate conversation, strengthen collaboration, increase program engagement, and guide decisions that best serve children. Equally important is our responsibility to support program providers, nonprofits, state agencies, community members, and all stakeholders working to ensure that children and youth have access to every resource they need.

Just as flowers require good soil, consistent rain, and warm sunlight to flourish, children and youth need access to high-quality programs, strong schools, and healthy communities. This report is intended to help inform productive, forward-looking action across our state.

Five years later, we return to all 82 counties to assess risk and compare current conditions to those presented in the previous report. Throughout this report, changes in individual variable risk scores are noted when counties shift by more than one position from 2021. A summary of changes to cumulative risk scores is included at the conclusion of the report.

This report serves as a tool to better understand the challenges faced in each county and to highlight the unique strategies communities are using to address them. This year, we have included stories from nonprofits across Mississippi that are working to improve outcomes for children and families. These stories reflect the resilience of our state and demonstrate how local efforts can drive meaningful change at the community, county, and statewide levels.

We hope that these stories, paired with rigorous data analysis, encourage you to be part of turning the curve and to take an active role in strengthening outcomes for children and families in your community. In 2014, Mississippi ranked 48th in Education in the Annie E. Casey Foundation KIDS COUNT Data Book. In 2025, the ranking soared to 16th nationally. This is proof that we can do the hard work to ensure positive change. Mississippi is strongest when we work together.

Dr. Ashley Parker Sheils
Chief Executive Officer
The Children's Foundation of Mississippi

FOREWORD

As State Superintendent of Education, I'm proud to share Mississippi's Risk and Reach Report for 2026. This report is a tool to help us better understand how Mississippi's children are doing and where we need to focus our efforts. It brings together data on health, education, economic stability, and family and community well-being. What becomes clear is something many of us already know from experience: these areas are closely connected, and we can't improve one without paying attention to the others.

As a parent and an educator, I've seen how much a child's early experiences shape what happens once they get to school. When children arrive healthy, supported, and ready to learn, everything we do as educators becomes more effective. That's why our work at the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) extends beyond academics alone. We're focused on supporting the whole child from the earliest years through graduation.

That work starts long before kindergarten. In the first three years of life, a child's brain develops at a rapid pace and lays the foundation for future learning and behavior. The MDE has continued to support programs that serve children from birth to age five because strong early learning opportunities can have lasting benefits for children and their families.

Across Mississippi, that commitment is evident in our expanding public pre-K models: Early Learning Collaboratives and State Invested Pre-K programs. These programs are guided by state standards but built within communities. During the 2024-25 school year, more than 8,700 children in 50 counties participated. Along with expanding access to pre-K, our pre-K programs are a national model for quality. The National Institute of Early Education Research consistently names Mississippi as one of only five states in the nation that meet all quality standards for pre-K.

The impact of the state's pre-K model and other publicly funded programs is evident. This report highlights improvements in kindergarten readiness in several counties. Holmes and Jefferson Counties, for example, saw significant reductions in risk levels, and similar progress has occurred in Sharkey, Stone, and Webster Counties. These changes don't happen by chance; they reflect the work of educators, literacy and early childhood coaches, and family engagement efforts to help children build strong foundations at home. These collaborations extend through elementary and secondary school, which have resulted in higher student achievement in reading and math and increasing graduation rates.

Health is another critical part of this picture. Children who aren't healthy face real challenges in the classroom. Access to consistent healthcare allows for early identification of developmental needs and helps ensure children are ready to learn each day. School nurses play an important role because for many students, school nurses are their primary connection to healthcare services. In recent years, Mississippi has expanded its school nursing workforce to 639 nurses serving schools across the state, which is well within the national guidelines for nurse-to-student ratios. While there is still more to do, this is meaningful progress.

This report doesn't shy away from the challenges we face, but it demonstrates what's possible when schools, families, healthcare providers, and communities work together on behalf of children. We all firmly believe that every child in our state deserves every opportunity to succeed. This belief guides our work and remains at the center of every decision we make.

Dr. Lance Evans
Mississippi State Superintendent of Education

METHODOLOGY

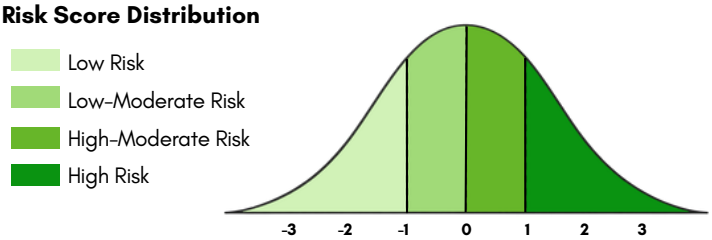
In this report, methodology was replicated from the 2021 Risk and Reach Report by using data from the 16 risk indicators within the traditional four KIDS COUNT domains: economic, health, education, and family and community. Data from these domains were used to assess the potential impacts on young children's overall well-being and quality of life. All data presented here are aggregated to the county-level and publicly available. A full list of indicators used from each domain follows this summary below.

For valid comparison, data from each risk indicator were evaluated at the county level, using percentages, rates, and scores to produce an "apples-to-apples" analysis. Population counts were not published here or used for comparisons; however, education indicators that measure test scores required using student populations to aggregate values up to the county level. County data are presented in tables and maps. Sources are superscripted and located in the "References" section on page 50.

A "risk level" estimate was calculated for each county and accompanies each indicator's summary. The calculation compares indicator data from one county to data from every other county and ranks them based on their relationship. The county ranking is then separated into four risk categories using the standard deviation in a normal distribution, which is derived from standardized z-scores ($z = x - \mu / \sigma$). The z-score measures how many standard deviations a value is from the mean, with the sign indicating direction (positive above, negative below). Thus, the risk categories were determined based on the following criteria:

- **Risk level 1 (low risk)** has a z-score of less than -1: (more than 1 standard deviation below the mean)
- **Risk level 2 (low to moderate risk)** has a z-score that is $\geq$ -1 and less than 0 (less than 1 standard deviation below the mean)
- **Risk level 3 (moderate to high risk)** has a z-score that is $\geq$ 0 and less than 1 (less than 1 standard deviation above the mean)
- **Risk level 4 (high risk)** has a z-score of 1 or greater (more than 1 standard deviation above the mean)

Risk Score Distribution



Finally, a composite risk score was produced for each county by summing the county's z-scores across all 16 indicators and using the formula to rank them into four bins as described above.

For each indicator and the cumulative scores, statistically significant changes in county level risk are provided by comparing the risk score in this report to those in the 2021 report. Changes were deemed significant if the county's risk score changed by more than one place (e.g., increased by 2 places or decreased by 3). Both the risk score and county-level averages are presented so communities can identify exactly how much their county has changed and dive into the stories behind those statistics.

In some instances, a county's risk rating for an indicator may have remained unchanged or deteriorated from the prior report, even when that county's indicator showed improvement. This occurs because a county's risk rating adjusts relative to the performance of all counties and may decline or stay unchanged because other counties performed better.

Analysis of Issaquena County's risk profile was not included in this year's report due to its small population, scarcity of reliable data, and suppression of those data with small sample sizes for most of the risk categories assessed. Since the risk rankings are computed relative to the performance of all counties, we tested each risk category and overall risk tabulation both with and without Issaquena County's available data and found some minute differences in the calculated results, none of which changed the overall risk estimates nor significantly impacted the individual risk category rankings.

Throughout the Risk section, you'll notice this symbol marking select "Reach Roots." These callouts highlight individuals, organizations, and efforts working to improve outcomes for children and families across Mississippi.

While this Risk data reflects real challenges, the Children's Foundation of Mississippi knows there are efforts taking root across communities, and we want to share their voices and stories. These Reach Roots reflect the work underway to strengthen systems, expand opportunity, and drive better outcomes for children and families over time.

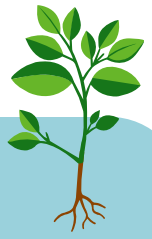
ECONOMIC RISK FACTOR:
UNEMPLOYMENT

When a parent loses a job, families suffer. Tighter budgets mean fewer family activities, food insecurity, and, in the worst scenarios, inconsistent access to utilities, child care, transport, and/or housing. Such financial strains can create toxic stress in young children, a process by which prolonged releases of cortisol do long-lasting damage to a child's body, brain, and development.[1]

It has also been shown that parents who fall upon economic difficulties have children who are more pessimistic about their future educational and vocational prospects.[2] For families experiencing the stressors of unemployment, raising children can be like trying to grow a garden in poor soil during an unpredictable season: a job loss can strip the family of the conditions and nutrients they need to thrive.

Strong job markets protect access to housing and child care. At the same time, stable housing and consistent access to child care help families remain rooted in the workforce and in schools, yielding benefits for the whole state.

In November 2025, the state's unemployment rate was 3.8%[3] versus the national rate of 4.5%[4]. Within the state, Jefferson County carried the highest unemployment rate, at 10.4%, while Lafayette County carried the lowest, at 2.5%. Of the remaining seven counties with the highest rates of unemployment—ranging from 5.7% to 8.7%—two had rates greater than twice the state average: Jefferson and Claiborne (8.7%). Caution should be used in interpreting quantitative data where small relative populations are represented.[5] No county's risk score for this indicator has changed by more than one place since 2021.



Reach Roots: Upward Bound at Alcorn State University

Economic hardship can shape how young people see their future, including whether higher education feels within reach. In Claiborne County, where unemployment remains among the highest in the state, Alcorn State University's Upward Bound Program has been recognized as a 2026 Reach Awardee for helping expand those possibilities for students.

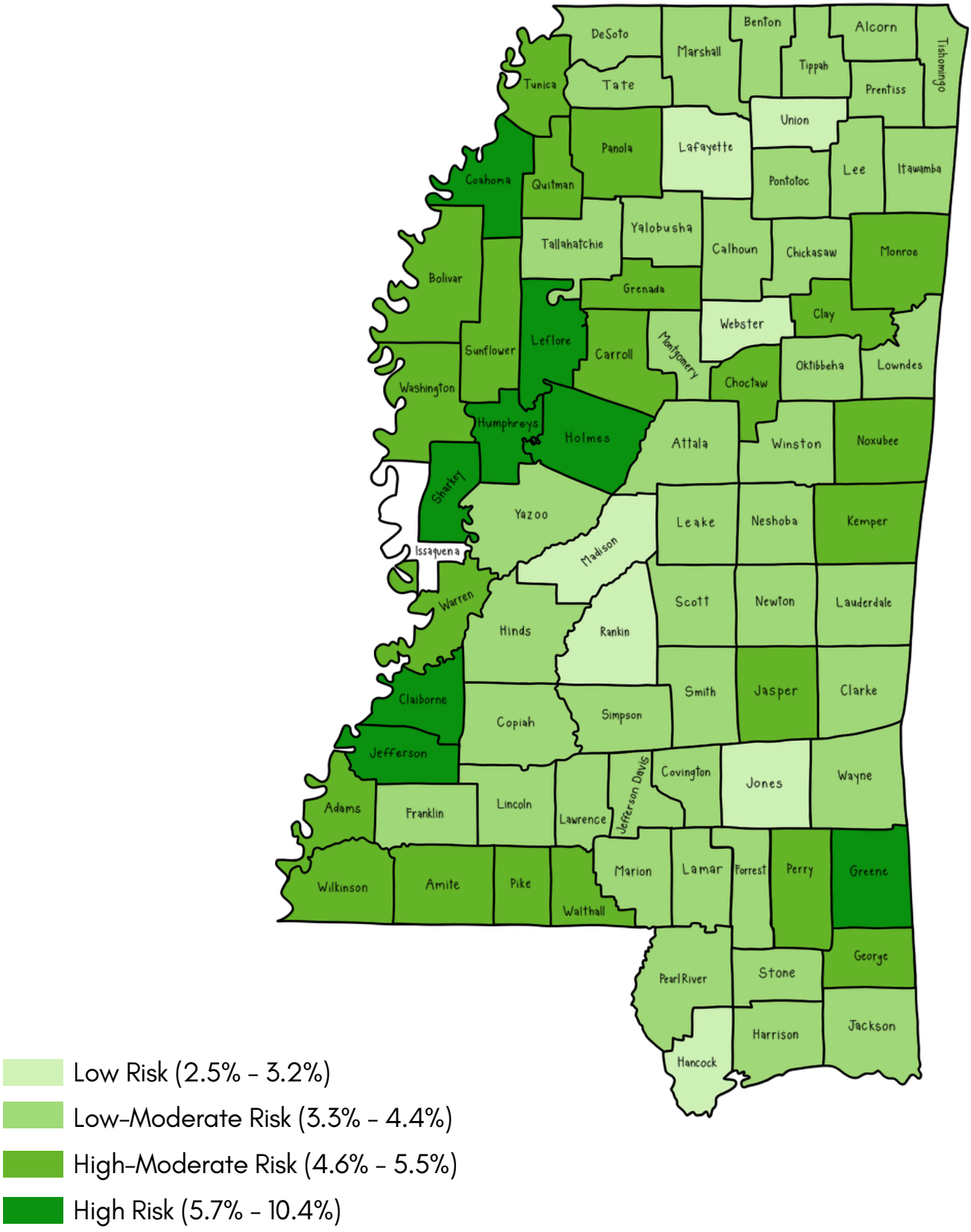
Upward Bound supports high school students, particularly those from low-income families or first-generation college backgrounds, by providing academic tutoring, college and career guidance, and exposure to college campuses and experiences. Through this support, students build confidence, strengthen their academic performance, and begin to see college as an attainable goal.

As one student shared, "Before joining the program, I wasn't sure if college was even an option for me… Today, I am enrolled in college and working toward my degree, something I once thought was out of reach."

By helping students graduate from high school and pursue higher education, programs like Upward Bound contribute to stronger communities across Mississippi.

MAP 1

UNEMPLOYMENT RATE, NOV. 2025



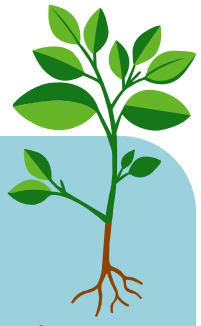
ECONOMIC RISK FACTOR:
PARENT EDUCATION

Parents' education is one of the strongest predictors of children's academic success.[6] Parents' higher education levels help their children develop effective problem-solving and goal-setting skills.[7,8] Additionally, when parents succeed academically, it raises their expectations about what is possible for their children to achieve. Research shows that these parents actively encourage their children to develop high expectations for themselves.[9] The more we cultivate the young minds of today, the brighter the blooms of the next generation.

Limited data is available about parental educational attainment. KIDS COUNT partners with the Population Reference Bureau to calculate the Household Head's Educational Attainment for households with children to approximate this value, but this data is only available at the state level. In Mississippi, 46% of children live in households where the head has graduated from high school with no further degrees. 43% of children live in households where the head has attained postsecondary education.[10]

Between 2018 and 2022, about 12% of Mississippi's mothers did not complete high school and earn a diploma. Scott County had the highest rate of mothers without a high school diploma (32%), followed by Calhoun County (19%), and seven other counties with 18%. Fifteen counties had rates less than 10%, ranging from 9% in Quitman and six other counties, to 5% in Claiborne County.[11]

Choctaw and Humphreys Counties have made remarkable improvement in this category since the previous Risk and Reach Report, each improving their risk category by 2 points. In Choctaw County, 15.5% of moms had less than a high school diploma in the 2021 report, as compared to 8% of moms according to the most recent data. In 2021, 20.5% of moms in Humphreys County had less than a high school diploma, while only 13% of moms had not received their diploma as of this report. No counties significantly declined in maternal education risk.



Reach Roots:
Legacy Education and Community Empowerment Foundation

While Scott County has one of the highest rates of mothers without a high school diploma, a factor closely linked to children's academic outcomes, organizations like Legacy Education and Community Empowerment Foundation are helping ensure young people have access to the skills and support that contribute to success.

For more than 14 years, Legacy has led a wide range of initiatives focused on youth empowerment, education, and community engagement. Serving 17 counties across Mississippi, including Scott County, Legacy works through programs like Youth Connections, scholarship support, school supply distribution, and intergenerational learning opportunities to equip young people with the skills, resources, and encouragement needed to navigate challenges and plan for their futures.

Efforts like these help young people build confidence, develop essential skills, and see new possibilities for their futures. Building these skills helps create stronger pathways for children and contributes to the long-term success of Mississippi as a whole.

TABLE 1

PERCENT OF MOTHERS WITHOUT A HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA, 2018 & 2022

	2018 RATE	2021 RISK	2022 RATE	2026 RISK		2018 RATE	2021 RISK	2022 RATE	2026 RISK
Adams	15%	3	13%	2	**Leflore**	22.5%	4	18%	4
Alcorn	18%	3	16%	3	**Lincoln**	12.9%	2	11%	2
Amite	10.7%	2	11%	2	**Lowndes**	8.7%	2	8%	1
Attala	13.1%	2	11%	2	**Madison**	9.3%	2	9%	1
Benton	14.3%	3	13%	2	**Marion**	15.3%	3	14%	3
Bolivar	15.5%	3	12%	2	**Marshall**	16.2%	3	14%	3
Calhoun	17.5%	3	19%	4	**Monroe**	12.4%	2	13%	2
Carroll	8.6%	2	8%	1	**Montgomery**	9.3%	2	10%	2
Chickasaw	18.6%	3	16%	3	**Neshoba**	19.5%	4	18%	4
Choctaw	15.5%	3	8%	1	**Newton**	9.2%	2	12%	2
Claiborne	5.6%	1	5%	1	**Noxubee**	13%	2	15%	3
Clarke	14.1%	3	13%	2	**Oktibbeha**	4.5%	1	6%	1
Clay	8.5%	1	10%	2	**Panola**	17.3%	3	16%	3
Coahoma	18.5%	3	17%	3	**Pearl River**	13.2%	2	12%	2
Copiah	18%	3	18%	4	**Perry**	13%	2	13%	2
Covington	10%	2	13%	2	**Pike**	17.8%	3	17%	3
DeSoto	7.3%	1	8%	1	**Pontotoc**	20.8%	4	18%	4
Forrest	11.7%	2	13%	2	**Prentiss**	13.6%	3	12%	2
Franklin	13.5%	2	14%	3	**Quitman**	6.6%	1	9%	1
George	11.7%	2	13%	2	**Rankin**	7%	1	7%	1
Greene	13.8%	3	11%	2	**Scott**	32.2%	4	32%	4
Grenada	10.5%	2	13%	2	**Sharkey**	14.9%	3	15%	3
Hancock	9.7%	2	9%	1	**Simpson**	11%	2	12%	2
Harrison	12.7%	2	12%	2	**Smith**	12.3%	2	11%	2
Hinds	13%	2	12%	2	**Stone**	5.8%	1	9%	1
Holmes	12.2%	2	10%	2	**Sunflower**	14.1%	3	14%	3
Humphreys	20.5%	4	13%	2	**Tallahatchie**	19.2%	4	16%	3
Issaquena	27.3%				**Tate**	9.1%	2	11%	2
Itawamba	13.9%	3	14%	3	**Tippah**	12.1%	2	12%	2
Jackson	8%	1	9%	1	**Tishomingo**	12.6%	2	12%	2
Jasper	7%	1	9%	1	**Tunica**	18.7%	4	18%	4
Jefferson	6.4%	1	10%	2	**Union**	14.2%	3	14%	3
Jefferson Davis	9.4%	2	10%	2	**Walthall**	11.8%	2	12%	2
Jones	18.6%	3	18%	4	**Warren**	13.2%	2	12%	2
Kemper	17.2%	3	13%	2	**Washington**	18.1%	3	17%	3
Lafayette	6.5%	1	7%	1	**Wayne**	11.6%	2	14%	3
Lamar	8.2%	1	7%	1	**Webster**	10.2%	2	9%	1
Lauderdale	14.6%	3	13%	2	**Wilkinson**	10.7%	2	11%	2
Lawrence	17.4%	3	15%	3	**Winston**	11.5%	2	11%	2
Leake	20%	4	17%	3	**Yalobusha**	25.7%	4	18%	4
Lee	10.8%	2	11%	2	**Yazoo**	18.6%	3	15%	3

ECONOMIC RISK FACTOR:
CHILDHOOD POVERTY

Time spent living in poverty is rarely a singular adverse episode. Especially when encountered in childhood, poverty can trigger negative ripple effects that reverberate throughout the rest of life. The malnutrition, toxic stress, and learning delays associated with children living in poverty often translate to poor long-term well-being and economic prospects in the form of lower graduation rates, limited adult earnings, a renewed cycle of poverty, and/or involvement in the criminal justice system.[1, 12, 13, 14] Furthermore, lifelong health risks increase, including heart disease, obesity, cancer, and stroke.[15] Protecting access to nutritious food, child care, and housing for families is like enriching the soil, installing irrigation, and protecting young plants from harsh conditions so that families have what they need to grow and end the cycle of poverty.

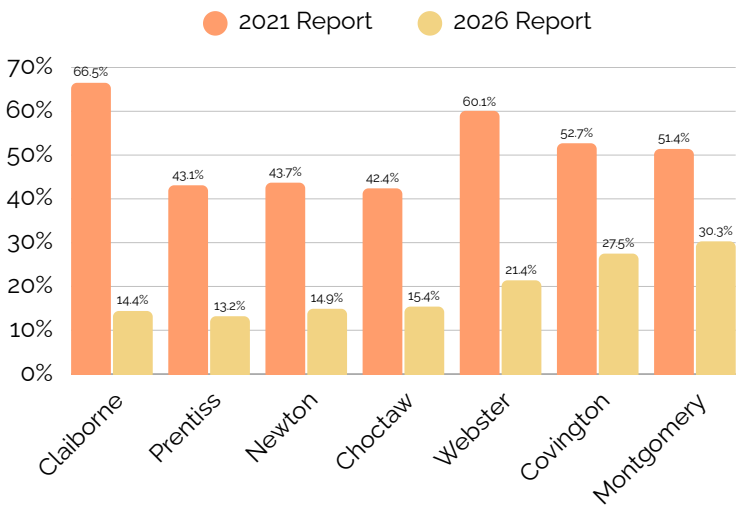
In the United States, the average rate of children age 5 and younger living in poverty was 15% between 2019-2024. During the same period, 25% of Mississippi's children, 0-5, lived in poverty, which is 67.7% higher than the national average. Fourteen counties were deemed high risk for this indicator. At 69.3%, Tunica County had the highest incidence rate in the state and was among six counties with rates exceeding 50%.

Fifteen low-risk counties had rates between 8.4% (Hancock) and 17.9% (Stone).[16]

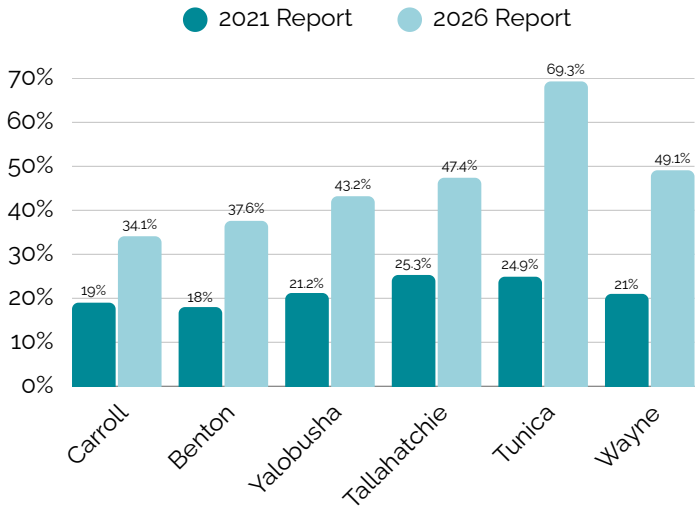
Risk categories for eleven counties have changed considerably since the 2021 report. In five counties, risk has improved by two or more places. Claiborne County has seen a substantially improved child poverty rate, moving from a level 4 risk to a level 1 risk. In the 2021 report, 66.5% of young children lived in poverty in Claiborne County, while only 14.4% are experiencing poverty today. Rankings for Prentiss, Newton, and Choctaw Counties moved from a level 3 risk to a level 1 risk, while those in Webster, Covington, and Montgomery Counties made jumps from level 4 to level 2.

Counties that have seen a significant increase in childhood poverty include Carroll, Benton, and Yalobusha, which have increased from a level 1 risk to a level 3 risk; Tallahatchie and Tunica, which have increased from a level 2 risk to a level 4 risk; and Wayne County, which has increased from a level 1 risk to a level 4 risk. Child poverty rates in each of these counties have significantly increased, with Carroll and Tallahatchie doubling, and Tunica nearly tripling.

Counties Making Strides in Early Childhood Poverty

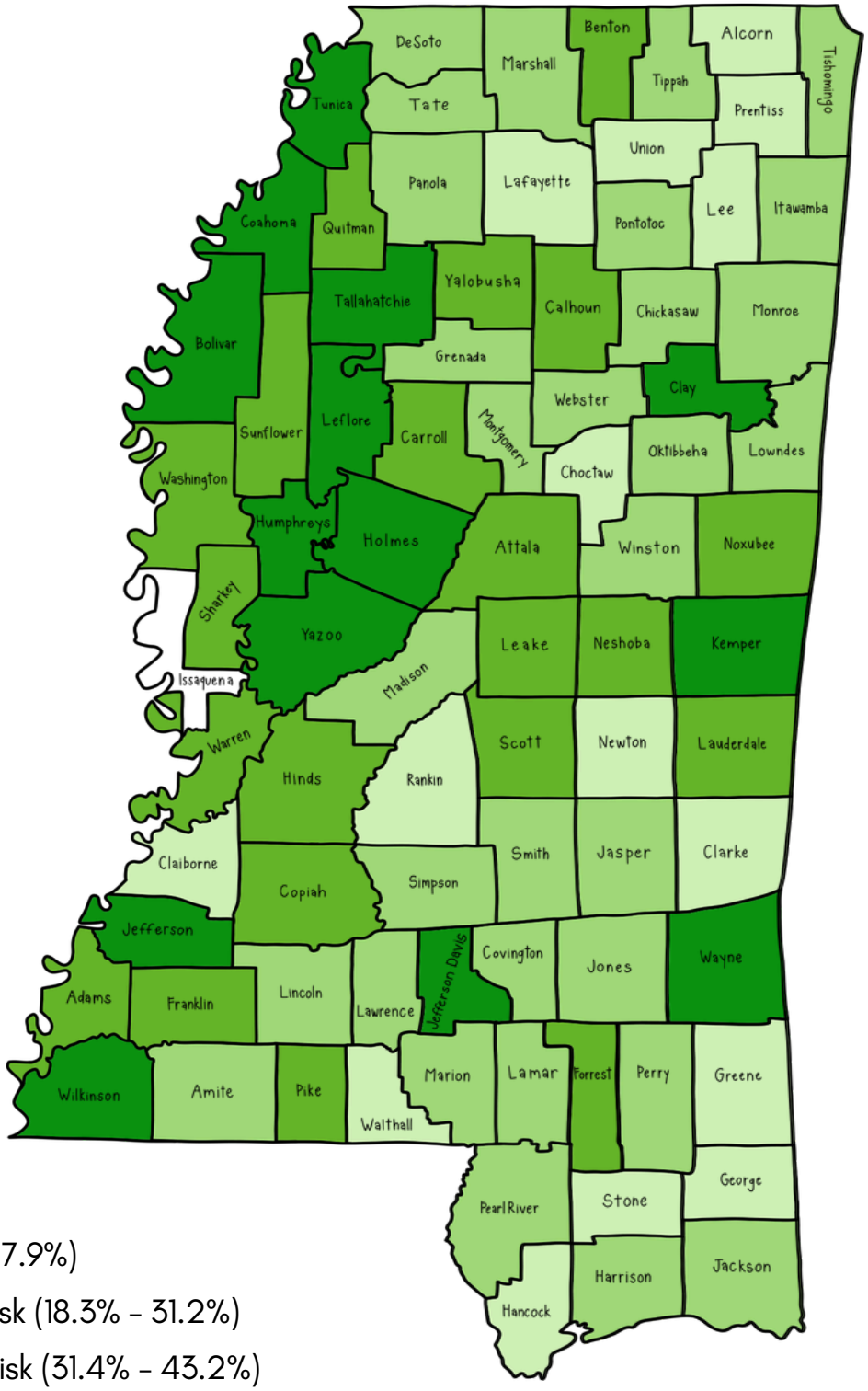


Counties Falling Behind in Early Childhood Poverty



MAP 2

YOUNG CHILD POVERTY RATE (BIRTH - AGE 5), 2018-2024



- Low Risk (8.4% – 17.9%)
- Low-Moderate Risk (18.3% – 31.2%)
- High-Moderate Risk (31.4% – 43.2%)
- High Risk (44.5% – 69.3%)

ECONOMIC RISK FACTOR:
FOOD INSECURITY

When people have insufficient access to enough nutritious food, this is called food insecurity. Food insecurity has significant negative impacts on growing children.[17] Lack of access to enough healthy food can hinder brain development and increase risks for developmental delays in young children. Mississippi consistently ranks as one of the nation's most insecure states, despite farmland comprising 30% of the state's landscape.[18] We must do more to make sure our children's potential can bloom.

In 2023, the child food insecurity rate in Mississippi was 19.4%, compared to the national average of 19.2%. This is an improvement from the state's 2021 average of 24.4%. Within the state, child food insecurity rates ranged from 46.2% in Holmes County to 12.9% in Itawamba County. Sixty-eight counties (82.9% of counties) had rates exceeding the national average. In 2023, fifteen Mississippi counties were rated high risk for this indicator, with child food insecurity averages ranging from 42.6% (Holmes) to 35.8% (Yazoo).[19]

Claiborne County's risk score dramatically improved in this area, moving from a level 4 risk to a level 1 risk by decreasing child food insecurity by 2.5x (37% to 14.4%). Other counties with improved rates are Choctaw, Clarke, Newton, Prentiss, and Walthall, whose ranks each moved from a level 3 risk to a level 1 risk. Also improving was Montgomery County, moving from a level 4 risk to a level 2 risk.

Tunica County's child food insecurity rate more than doubled, from 21% in the 2021 report to 42.3% in this report. This change increased the risk score from 2 to 4. At the same time, Prentiss County's child food insecurity rate dropped substantially, from 25% in the 2021 report to 14.7% in this report.

Counties with Significant Changes Regarding Child Food Insecurity

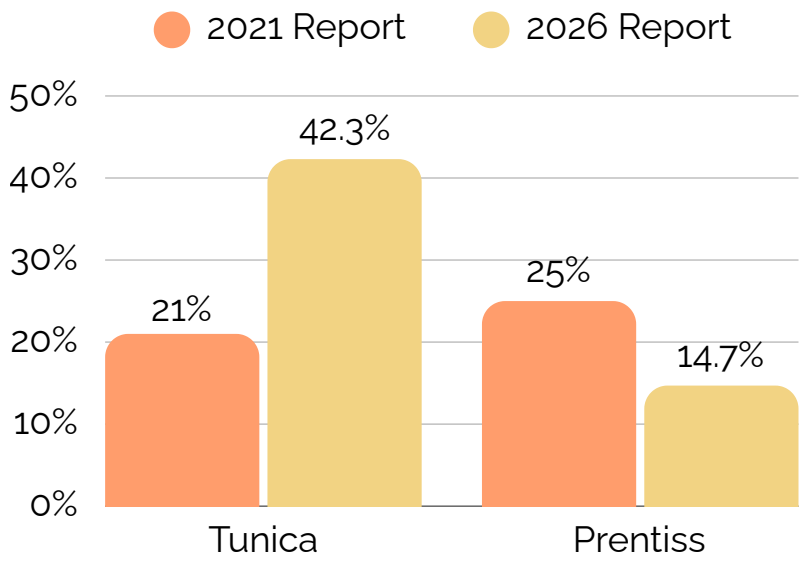


TABLE 2

CHILD FOOD INSECURITY, 2018 & 2023

	2018 RATE	2021 RISK	2023 RATE	2026 RISK		2018 RATE	2021 RISK	2023 RATE	2026 RISK
Adams	31.3%	4	32.9%	3	**Leflore**	29.2%	3	37.5%	4
Alcorn	19.3%	2	18.9%	1	**Lincoln**	21.1%	2	22.3%	2
Amite	24.6%	3	34.2%	3	**Lowndes**	21%	2	23.4%	2
Attala	24.7%	3	27.8%	3	**Madison**	12.6%	1	16%	1
Benton	20.5%	2	26%	2	**Marion**	25.8%	3	24.5%	2
Bolivar	28.8%	3	36.7%	4	**Marshall**	20.8%	2	30.7%	3
Calhoun	25.4%	3	25.4%	2	**Monroe**	20.2%	2	18.6%	1
Carroll	19.5%	2	26%	2	**Montgomery**	31%	4	29.6%	3
Chickasaw	21.5%	2	27.2%	3	**Neshoba**	23.4%	2	26.2%	2
Choctaw	26.8%	3	22.6%	2	**Newton**	25%	3	25.6%	2
Claiborne	37%	4	33.4%	3	**Noxubee**	27.4%	3	36%	4
Clarke	24.6%	3	24.5%	2	**Oktibbeha**	17.9%	1	21.7%	2
Clay	23.7%	2	29.4%	3	**Panola**	23.4%	2	27.6%	3
Coahoma	29.2%	3	38.8%	4	**Pearl River**	19.3%	2	18.1%	1
Copiah	23.7%	2	28.9%	3	**Perry**	24.4%	3	24.9%	2
Covington	23.8%	2	21.8%	2	**Pike**	28%	3	31.6%	3
DeSoto	12.4%	1	15.3%	1	**Pontotoc**	21.6%	2	19%	1
Forrest	22.5%	2	25.6%	2	**Prentiss**	25.1%	3	14.7%	1
Franklin	20.3%	2	29.7%	3	**Quitman**	32.6%	4	38.3%	4
George	20.1%	2	18.8%	1	**Rankin**	11.8%	1	14.5%	1
Greene	19.7%	2	23.3%	2	**Scott**	25.1%	3	22.4%	2
Grenada	25.3%	3	28.3%	3	**Sharkey**	24.9%	3	32.3%	3
Hancock	20.8%	2	17.3%	1	**Simpson**	24%	2	24.1%	2
Harrison	20.9%	2	23.6%	2	**Smith**	20%	2	22%	2
Hinds	21%	2	30.5%	3	**Stone**	21.5%	2	21.1%	2
Holmes	34.4%	4	46.2%	4	**Sunflower**	28.4%	3	37%	4
Humphreys	35.1%	4	43%	4	**Tallahatchie**	26.9%	3	33.9%	3
Issaquena	41.1%				**Tate**	21.4%	2	21.6%	2
Itawamba	18.4%	1	12.9%	1	**Tippah**	21.3%	2	22%	2
Jackson	19.6%	2	19.8%	2	**Tishomingo**	20.4%	2	17.5%	1
Jasper	26.4%	3	28.1%	3	**Tunica**	20.5%	2	42.3%	4
Jefferson	40%	4	44.8%	4	**Union**	17.8%	1	19.4%	2
Jefferson Davis	26.2%	3	37.1%	4	**Walthall**	26.8%	3	21.2%	2
Jones	21.6%	2	23.8%	2	**Warren**	21.7%	2	27.7%	3
Kemper	30.2%	4	37.9%	4	**Washington**	30.5%	4	39.4%	4
Lafayette	15.6%	1	15.4%	1	**Wayne**	23.7%	2	24.8%	2
Lamar	16.3%	1	19.3%	2	**Webster**	27.8%	3	21.2%	2
Lauderdale	23%	2	29.2%	3	**Wilkinson**	33.9%	4	34.1%	3
Lawrence	21.6%	2	26.3%	2	**Winston**	25.8%	3	37.4%	4
Leake	25.3%	3	24.8%	2	**Yalobusha**	19.1%	2	29.2%	3
Lee	17.7%	1	19.2%	1	**Yazoo**	28.1	3	35.8%	4

HEALTH RISK FACTOR:

LOW BIRTH WEIGHT

Babies born weighing less than five pounds and eight ounces (2,500 grams) are considered low birth weight. While some babies born with low birth weights are healthy, a low birth weight can cause health complications, both at birth and throughout life.[20] In 2022, low birth weight was the second leading cause of infant death in the United States.[21]

Babies can be born at low weight for different reasons, including premature birth, the mother's general health, high blood pressure, drug use, or specific conditions like intrauterine growth restriction (IUGR).[12] Increased access to high-quality prenatal health care that addresses risk factors early in pregnancy can contribute to more positive health outcomes for Mississippians.

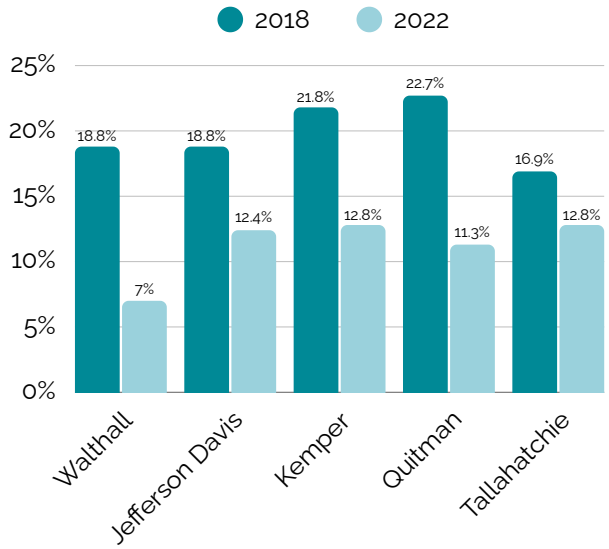
Mississippi's birth rate has been steadily declining since 2014. In our previous report, we noted that about 100 babies are born in Mississippi each day. According to the most recent data available, about 95 babies are born each day, and 12.7% of live births in 2022 were infants with low birth weights. Babies born in Humphreys County had the highest incidence (and risk), at 22.7%. Walthall County had the lowest rate, at 7%.

Ten counties were assigned the lowest risk for this indicator, with rates ranging from 7.2% (George) to 9.6% (Lafayette). The remaining high-risk county rates ranged from 16.8% in Franklin County to 22.2% in Holmes. **Notably, the incidence of low birth weight among black infants—18.5% statewide—was more than twice the rate for both white (8.8%) and other (8.7%) races.[21]**

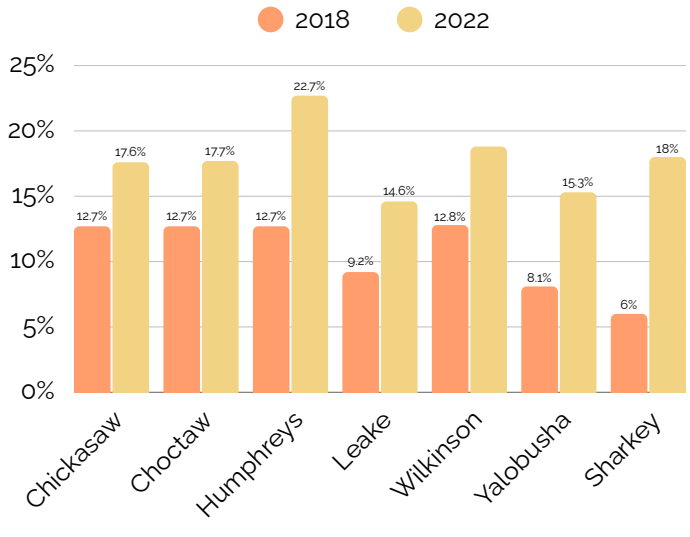
Six counties have seen significant improvements in the incidence of low birth weight babies. Walthall moved from a level 4 risk to a level 1 risk by reducing the rate of low birth weight babies from 18.8% to 7%. Counties that saw their risk move from a level 4 risk to a level 2 risk include Jefferson Davis, Kemper, Quitman, and Tallahatchie.

Meanwhile, seven counties have seen a significant increase in the incidence of babies born with low birth weight. Sharkey County's risk score jumped from level 1 to level 4; scores in Yalobusha and Leake Counties have increased from a level 1 risk to a level 3 risk; and scores in Wilkinson, Humphreys, Choctaw, and Chickasaw Counties have increased from a level 2 risk to a level 4 risk.

Counties Making Strides in Low Birth Weight Rates

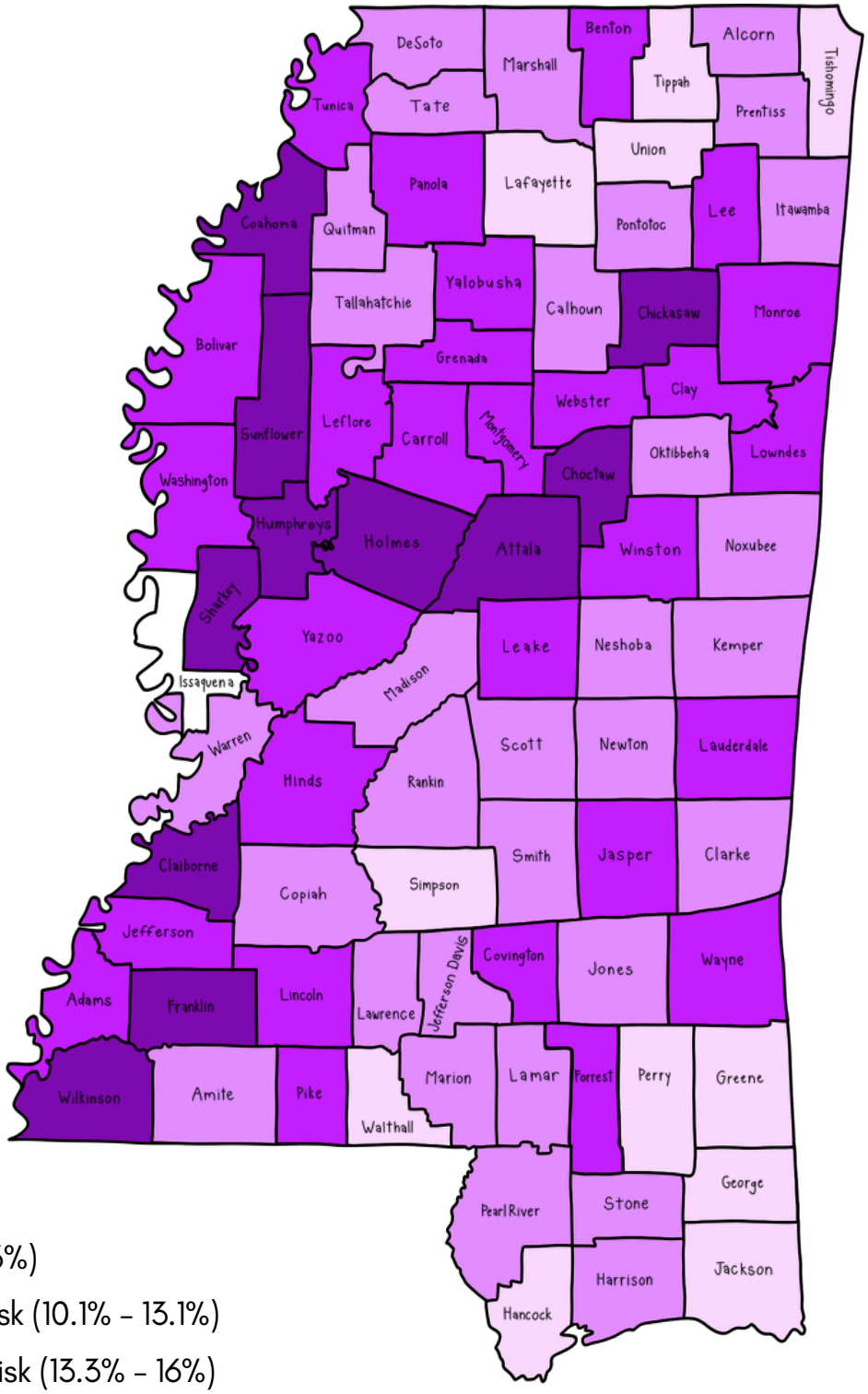


Counties Falling Behind in Low Birth Weight Rates



MAP 3

PERCENT LOW BIRTH WEIGHT BABIES, 2022



Low Risk (7% - 9.6%)

Low-Moderate Risk (10.1% - 13.1%)

High-Moderate Risk (13.3% - 16%)

High Risk (16.8% - 22.7%)

HEALTH RISK FACTOR:

INFANT MORTALITY RATE

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the five leading causes of infant death in 2022 were birth defects, preterm birth and low birth weight, maternal pregnancy complications, sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), and accidental injuries.[14] Good prenatal care has been proven to reduce the infant mortality rate; in Mississippi, high poverty rates and a low number of prenatal and obstetric physicians make accessing adequate prenatal health care prohibitive.[22]

Mississippi has the highest infant mortality rate of any state in the nation (that is, the greatest percent of infants who do not make it to their first birthday). Infant deaths usually point to unmet health needs in medical care, nutrition, and/or education, and, thus, indicate much about the overall health of a community or region.

In 2022, Mississippi led the nation in number of infant deaths per 1,000, with almost *double* the national rate of mortality: 9.1 deaths per 1,000 live births, compared to the national rate of 5.6 deaths per 1,000 live births. This same year, black infants died at more than twice the rate of white infants in the state, with 10.9 deaths per 1,000 births and 4.5 deaths per 1,000 births, respectively.[23]

Only three counties' risk scores differed significantly from the previous report. Sharkey and Calhoun Counties have improved, moving their risk scores from 4 to 2, while Humphreys County has experienced an increased risk score from 2 to 4.

MAP 4

INFANT MORTALITY RATE, 2013-2022

- Low Risk (3.8 - 6.9)
- Low-Moderate Risk (7 - 9.2)
- High-Moderate Risk (9.4 - 11.8)
- High Risk (11.9 - 15.7)

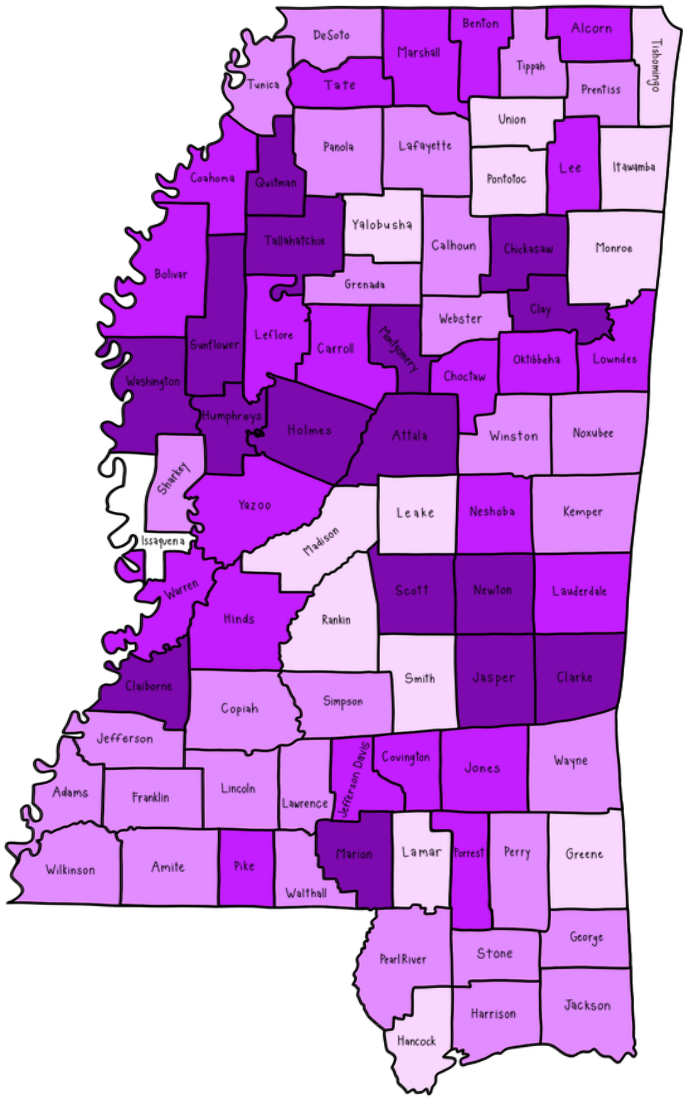


TABLE 3

INFANT MORTALITY RATE, 2018 & 2022

	2018 RATE PER 1,000	2021 RISK	2022 RATE PER 1,000	2026 RISK		2018 RATE PER 1,000	2021 RISK	2022 RATE PER 1,000	2026 RISK
Adams	9	2	8.1	2	Leflore	10.7	3	9.9	3
Alcorn	12	3	10.2	3	Lincoln	8.8	2	8.1	2
Amite	7.8	2	7.3	2	Lowndes	8.6	2	10.1	3
Attala	17.6	4	13.3	4	Madison	5.2	1	6.3	1
Benton	10.4	3	11.8	3	Marion	11.2	3	12.7	4
Bolivar	7.1	2	9.4	3	Marshall	10.5	3	10.4	3
Calhoun	12.9	4	8.3	2	Monroe	7.3	2	6.6	1
Carroll	9	2	9.4	3	Montgomery	10.6	3	12.6	4
Chickasaw	9.8	3	12.2	4	Neshoba	10.5	3	9.9	3
Choctaw	6.9	2	10.3	3	Newton	11.8	3	12.4	4
Claiborne	18.4	4	14.7	4	Noxubee	8.5	2	8.8	2
Clarke	11.1	3	12.1	4	Oktibbeha	11.9	3	10.5	3
Clay	15.2	4	15.7	4	Panola	8.8	2	9.2	2
Coahoma	10.3	3	9.6	3	Pearl River	6.4	2	8.2	2
Copiah	5.7	1	8.7	2	Perry	4.5	1	8.8	2
Covington	11.6	3	9.9	3	Pike	8.4	2	9.4	3
DeSoto	5.5	1	7	2	Pontotoc	7.6	2	6.6	1
Forrest	11.5	3	11	3	Prentiss	6.7	2	7.7	2
Franklin	9.3	2	9.2	2	Quitman	21.7	4	15.1	4
George	8.3	2	7	2	Rankin	5.1	1	5.4	1
Greene	8.9	2	6.6	1	Scott	12.2	3	12.1	4
Grenada	9.7	3	9.1	2	Sharkey	13.1	4	8.8	2
Hancock	7.9	2	6.6	1	Simpson	9.7	3	7.9	2
Harrison	8.3	2	7.7	2	Smith	5.3	1	3.8	1
Hinds	9	2	9.9	3	Stone	7.4	2	8.9	2
Holmes	10.7	3	13.1	4	Sunflower	12.6	4	14.2	4
Humphreys	7.7	2	14.6	4	Tallahatchie	9.8	3	12.6	4
Issaquena	0	1			Tate	8.8	2	10.8	3
Itawamba	3.7	1	4.9	1	Tippah	10.2	3	7.8	2
Jackson	7.3	2	7.1	2	Tishomingo	8.8	2	5.9	1
Jasper	11.8	3	12.3	4	Tunica	10.8	3	8.9	2
Jefferson	10.4	3	8.9	2	Union	5.4	1	6.9	1
Jefferson Davis	12.5	3	11.1	3	Walthall	9.2	2	7.1	2
Jones	8.8	2	9.5	3	Warren	9.1	2	9.5	3
Kemper	11.2	3	8.1	2	Washington	9.9	3	11.9	4
Lafayette	9.5	3	8.9	2	Wayne	8.6	2	8.2	2
Lamar	6.8	2	6.5	1	Webster	8.5	2	8.3	2
Lauderdale	9.1	2	9.9	3	Wilkinson	8.3	2	7.4	2
Lawrence	11.1	3	8.5	2	Winston	12.1	3	9.1	2
Leake	5.3	1	6.4	1	Yalobusha	6.4	2	5.8	1
Lee	9.5	3	9.9	3	Yazoo	1	3	11.6	3

HEALTH RISK FACTOR:

UNINSURANCE

Access to comprehensive health insurance gives children and families greater opportunities to obtain healthcare, including preventive care and routine developmental screenings that help identify issues or delays early when interventions are most effective and less costly.[24] When children are healthy, they show up to school more equipped to learn and create stronger foundations for lifelong learning. In fact, when children have healthcare, reading test scores improve and high school and college completion rates go up.[25] Medically insured children also see better health and financial outcomes later in life.[26] Like nurtured seedlings that become vibrant plants, nurtured children see their potential bloom.

In 2024, 5% of Mississippi's children, 5 and under, lacked health insurance, matching the national rate. Nineteen counties were given a high-risk rating with rates of uninsured children (0-5) ranging from 35.7% in Kemper to 6.3%, in Pearl River County, with five counties having greater than 10% of uninsured 0 to 5-year-olds.

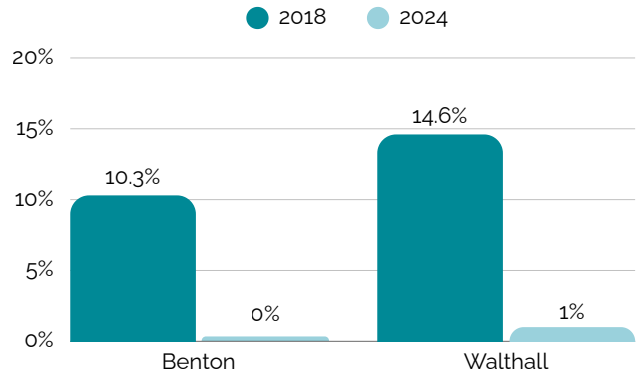
Among the 21 counties rated low-risk, ten had rates of 0. The remainder had the lowest non-zero rates, from 1.7% (Amite) to 0.1% (Adams).[27] Care should be exercised when interpreting data from counties with small populations.

Counties reporting 0 uninsured children under 6 years old:

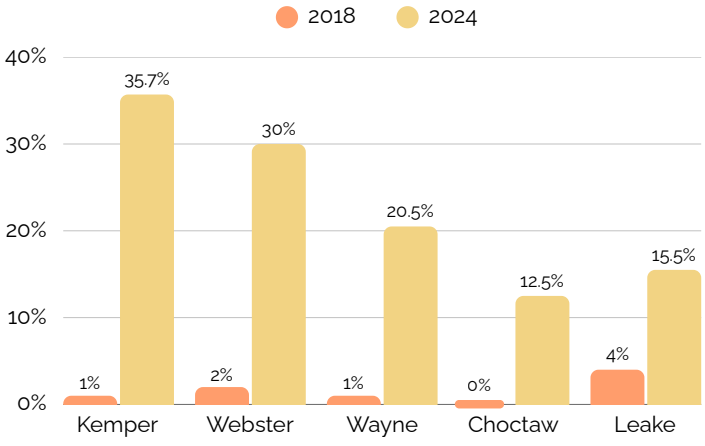
- Attala
- Benton
- Carroll
- Claiborne
- Holmes
- Jefferson Davis
- Lawrence
- Scott
- Tunica
- Wilkinson

Note: Rates of uninsured children in this dataset were markedly non-normally distributed,[28] reducing the validity of the typical risk calculation used throughout this report. For this variable, quartiles are used to estimate the risk category for each county. Because of this difference, direct comparisons between the risk presented in the 2021 report and this report are not possible. However, differences in rates are important to note. Benton and Walthall Counties have made significant strides in reducing the rate of uninsured children. Meanwhile, Kemper, Webster, Wayne, and Choctaw Counties have experienced significantly increased rates of uninsured children.

Counties Making Strides in Uninsured Young Children

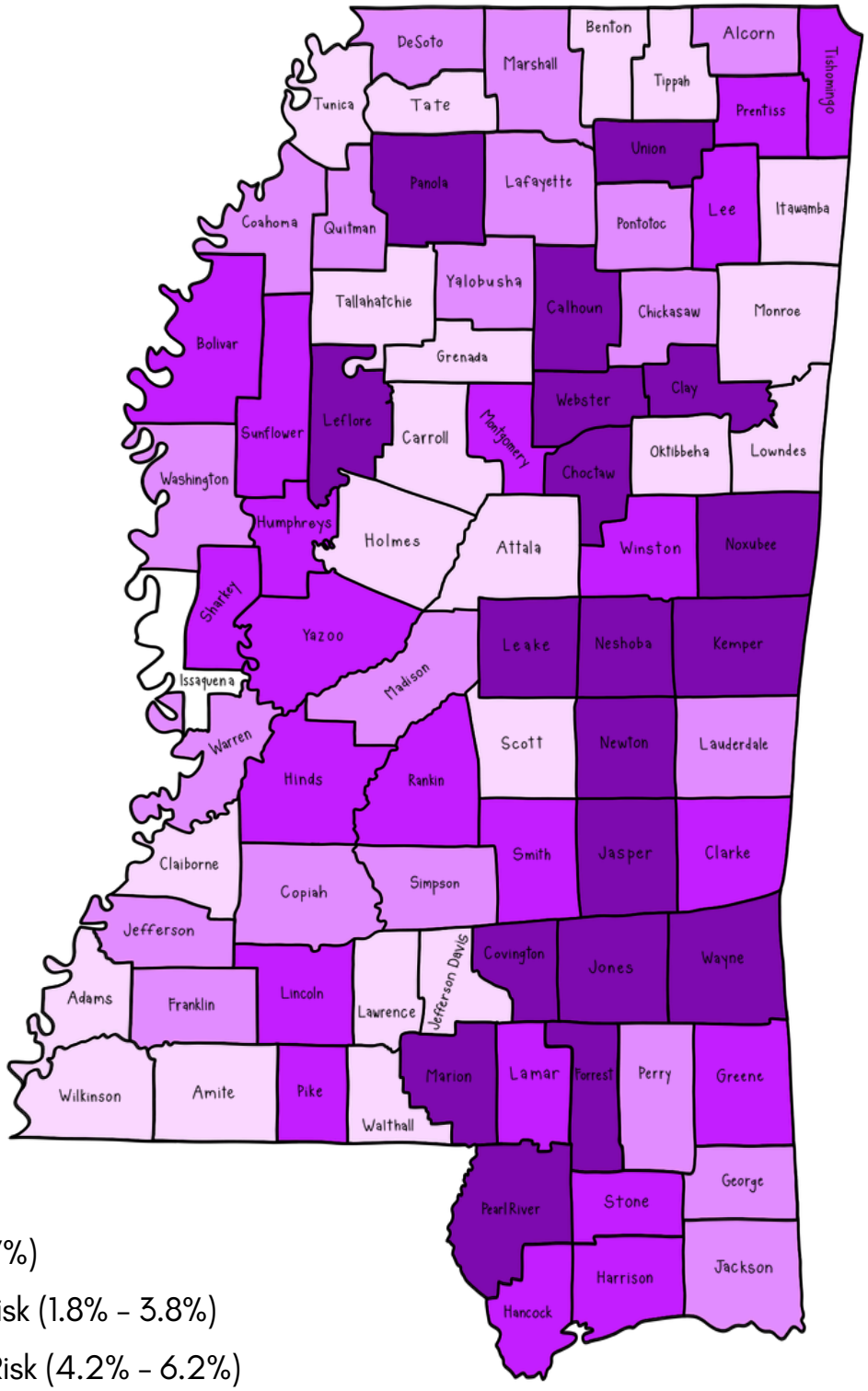


Counties Falling Behind in Rates of Uninsured Young Children



MAP 5

UNINSURANCE RATES AMONG CHILDREN UNDER 6, 2024



- Low Risk (0% – 1.7%)
- Low-Moderate Risk (1.8% – 3.8%)
- High-Moderate Risk (4.2% – 6.2%)
- High Risk (6.3% – 35.7%)

HEALTH RISK FACTOR:
TEEN PREGNANCY

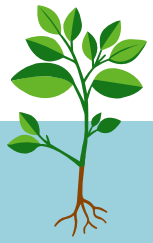
Nationwide, teen pregnancy rates have declined significantly since the 1990s. However, the U.S. continues to have a higher teen birth rate than most other industrialized countries. Teen pregnancy is more likely to occur in areas with high unemployment, low income, and low levels of formal education. Women who become parents as teenagers are at greater risk of social and economic disadvantage throughout their lives. They are less likely to complete their education, be employed, or earn high wages.[29]

Providing realistic paths to college or stable employment helps youth build future-oriented goals, which correlate with lower teen pregnancy rates.[30,31]

The 2017-2023 average birth rate for Mississippi teens, ages 15 to 19, was 28 per 1,000.

Teen births were lowest in Lafayette County (9 births per 1,000 teens) and highest in Sharkey County (66 births per 1,000 teens). Also falling into the low-risk category were nine additional counties with incidences ranging up to 22 births per 1,000 teens (Stone County). Nine counties ranked highest at risk for this indicator, bracketed by Sharkey and Panola (45 births per 1,000 teens) Counties.[32]

Since the 2021 report, only two counties have seen significant risk score changes for Teen Pregnancy. Risk in Wilkinson County dropped from 4 to 2, while risk in Yalobusha County increased from 2 to 4. It is important to note that the source of the 2021 report is no longer released by the Mississippi Department of Health. Therefore, the rates presented were sourced from County Health Rankings. The risk scores are calculated within-year and can be reliably compared.



Reach Roots: Family Biz Builder

Counties with higher rates of teen births often face overlapping challenges related to income, access to education, and opportunity. At the same time, these communities are also home to organizations working to expand those opportunities and support young people in building strong foundations for the future.

In Tunica County, Family Biz Builder serves children and families across Tunica, Coahoma, and DeSoto counties by providing structured education, mentoring, and workforce development opportunities. Many of the youth they serve come from environments where access to consistent academic support, positive role models, and enrichment activities is limited.

The organization focuses on strengthening literacy and academic foundations, building character and life skills through sports-based youth development, and creating leadership pathways. One example reflects this impact clearly. Two boys joined the program looking for something to do after school and, through consistent coaching and mentoring, grew in confidence, improved academically, and began setting goals. Today, they serve as Youth Coach Trainees, helping lead younger participants. As one shared, "I didn't think I was good at anything. Now the little kids look up to me."

Efforts like these help expand access to opportunity and support young people in building the skills and confidence that shape their future.

TABLE 4

TEEN BIRTH RATES, 2018 & 2023

	2018 RATE PER 1,000	2021 RISK	2023 RATE PER 1,000	2026 RISK		2018 RATE PER 1,000	2021 RISK	2023 RATE PER 1,000	2026 RISK
Adams	44.8	3	34	3	**Leflore**	52.4	4	39	3
Alcorn	31.4	2	34	3	**Lincoln**	37.2	3	34	3
Amite	23.5	2	24	2	**Lowndes**	21.7	2	25	2
Attala	38.3	3	28	2	**Madison**	13.1	1	15	1
Benton	43.3	3	38	3	**Marion**	30.7	2	30	2
Bolivar	39.3	3	36	3	**Marshall**	33.7	2	27	2
Calhoun	24.1	2	39	3	**Monroe**	35.6	3	29	2
Carroll	26.5	2	28	2	**Montgomery**	50.7	3	38	3
Chickasaw	29.9	2	43	3	**Neshoba**	40.3	3	42	3
Choctaw	45.2	3	32	2	**Newton**	19.2	2	28	2
Claiborne	24.5	2	29	2	**Noxubee**	32.6	2	38	3
Clarke	38.5	3	35	3	**Oktibbeha**	9.7	1	10	1
Clay	28.7	2	31	2	**Panola**	53.5	4	45	4
Coahoma	52.7	4	53	4	**Pearl River**	22.7	2	25	2
Copiah	35.1	3	31	2	**Perry**	56.4	4	38	3
Covington	33.8	2	41	3	**Pike**	35.2	3	32	2
DeSoto	18.4	2	18	1	**Pontotoc**	26.6	2	32	2
Forrest	26.2	2	23	2	**Prentiss**	45.3	3	33	2
Franklin	23.9	2	35	3	**Quitman**	32.3	2	43	3
George	40.1	3	33	2	**Rankin**	14.7	1	16	1
Greene	26.3	2	36	3	**Scott**	56.2	4	58	4
Grenada	32.8	2	38	3	**Sharkey**	77.5	4	66	4
Hancock	23.2	2	20	1	**Simpson**	30.6	2	31	2
Harrison	24.1	2	25	2	**Smith**	38.8	3	35	3
Hinds	25.4	2	26	2	**Stone**	15	1	22	1
Holmes	20	2	31	2	**Sunflower**	32.4	2	34	3
Humphreys	21.2	2	41	3	**Tallahatchie**	63	4	55	4
Issaquena	125		***		**Tate**	17.4	1	23	2
Itawamba	34.1	2	28	2	**Tippah**	36.6	3	34	3
Jackson	19.9	2	21	1	**Tishomingo**	41.6	3	28	2
Jasper	26.7	2	33	2	**Tunica**	74.5	4	63	4
Jefferson	36.1	3	28	2	**Union**	40.5	3	33	2
Jefferson Davis	32.6	2	40	3	**Walthall**	23.7	2	33	2
Jones	43.6	3	35	3	**Warren**	31.1	2	32	2
Kemper	15.8	1	21	1	**Washington**	33.4	2	41	3
Lafayette	7.4	1	9	1	**Wayne**	43.9	3	52	4
Lamar	27.8	2	20	1	**Webster**	23.4	2	27	2
Lauderdale	29.3	2	31	2	**Wilkinson**	64.9	4	23	2
Lawrence	36.4	3	40	3	**Winston**	28	2	33	2
Leake	56.1	4	53	4	**Yalobusha**	28.8	2	47	4
Lee	31.4	2	31	2	**Yazoo**	45.3	3	43	3

EDUCATION RISK FACTOR:
KINDERGARTEN READINESS

During the earliest years of a child's life, the brain has its biggest "growth spurt." Between the ages 0-3, the brain rapidly generates up to one million neural connections per second.[33] These early connections form the foundation for all future learning and behavior. These facts should guide our education policy and secure high-quality birth-to-five education for the ~100 children born in Mississippi every day.[34] According to economist Dr. James Heckman, investment in high-quality birth-to-five education can yield a 13% return on investment per child through better education, economic, health, and social outcomes.[35] We can help secure a future with more positive outcomes for Mississippi by nurturing the growing brains of our youngest children!

The Mississippi Department of Education reports Kindergarten Readiness based on Early Literacy Assessments whose scores measure students' knowledge and abilities against an overall benchmark. In the 2025-2026 version of the test, MDE revised the Fall Kindergarten Readiness benchmark for proficiency from a static cutoff score of 530 to the score that is the 56th percentile of all scores, which was shown to be a reliable indicator for reading proficiency by conclusion of third grade. Because of this change, 2025 results cannot be compared to those of previous years.

In Fall 2025, the state average Kindergarten Readiness Assessment score was 674. Thirty-seven percent of students met or exceeded the test's 56th percentile benchmark, with students in 37 counties meeting or surpassing the state average.

Fifteen counties (18%) were deemed low risk and had student scores ranging from 687 in Madison, to 703 in Holmes County. High risk was assigned to eleven counties whose students' scores were between 658 (Yazoo) and the lowest, 636, in Adams County. Because their districts are combined, data from Issaquena County is captured with those from Sharkey County.[36]

Significant Kindergarten Readiness improvement occurred across five counties. In Holmes and Jefferson Counties, risk scores decreased from 4 to 1. Sharkey County's score dropped from 3 to 1. Risk scores in Stone and Webster decreased from 4 to 2.

Five counties increased in risk score. In Amite County, risk increased from 1 to 4; in Wayne County, risk increased from 2 to 4; and in Washington, Alcorn, and Wayne Counties, risk scores increased from 1 to 3.

Reach Roots: Jefferson County Early Learning Collaborative & Eupora Rotary Club

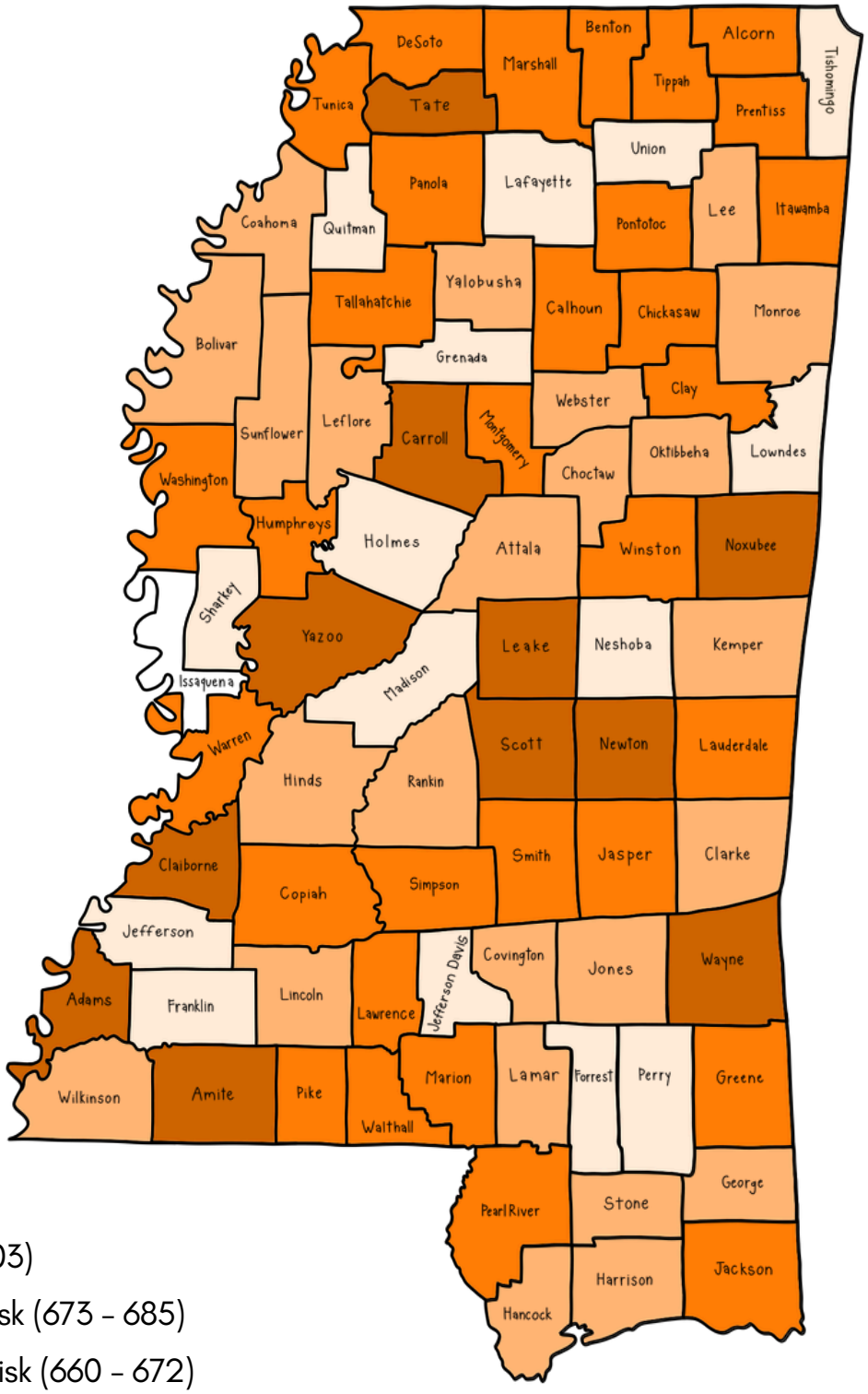
In both Jefferson and Webster Counties, improvements in Kindergarten Readiness reflect the impact of early investment in children and families. In Jefferson County, the Jefferson County Early Learning Collaborative (JCELC) provides high-quality pre-kindergarten experiences designed to ensure children enter kindergarten prepared academically, socially, and emotionally. Through a focus on early literacy, foundational skills, and social-emotional development, JCELC helps children build confidence and develop the tools they need to succeed in the classroom. Educators have seen firsthand how consistent support can help children who initially struggle with frustration or communication grow into more confident, engaged learners over the course of the year.

In Webster County, the Eupora Rotary Club contributes to that same foundation through sustained, community-led support. As a sponsor of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, the club helps provide developmentally appropriate books each month to children from birth to age five at no cost to families, supporting early language and literacy development before children ever enter a classroom. The club's broader efforts, including student recognition, scholarships, food drives, and support for basic needs, further strengthen the environment children need to learn and grow.

These efforts reflect how both structured early education programs and community-based initiatives contribute to stronger school readiness. Improvements in counties like Jefferson and Webster are supported by intentional investment in children during the earliest and most critical years of development.

MAP 6

KINDERGARTEN READINESS SCORES, 2025



- Low Risk (687 – 703)
- Low-Moderate Risk (673 – 685)
- High-Moderate Risk (660 – 672)
- High Risk (636 – 658)

EDUCATION RISK FACTOR:
LITERACY SKILLS

During early years, when the brain is at its most malleable and growing rapidly, experiences with language shape the neural pathways that will later support reading, writing, and comprehension. Early exposure to language skills makes these pathways stronger and easier to build upon, which positively influences future academic success. Research consistently shows that children who develop strong early literacy skills are more likely to read proficiently by third grade.[37] This matters because third grade reading proficiency is a strong predictor of future school achievement, graduation, and successful economic outcomes.[38]

The Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) assesses students' literacy skills using the Mississippi Academic Assessment Program (MAAP) standardized test.

In the spring of the 2024-2025 school year, 49.3% of third graders in the state scored proficient or better in language arts (ELA). Third-graders in the 18 counties assigned the lowest risk score had rates of ELA proficiency from 58.7%, in Jefferson, to 68%, in Kemper County. The ten counties designated a high-risk score had low student ELA proficiency rates ranging from 36% (Humphreys) to 36.8% (Adams).[39]

Three counties significantly improved their risk score in ELA proficiency. Jefferson and Kemper Counties improved from a level 4 risk to a level 1 risk, while Jefferson Davis County improved from a level 4 risk to a level 2 risk. Table 5 reflects current data only, as minimal change was observed since the previous reporting period.

MAP 7

STUDENTS SCORING PROFICIENT OR ABOVE ON MAAP ELA ASSESSMENT, SPRING 2025

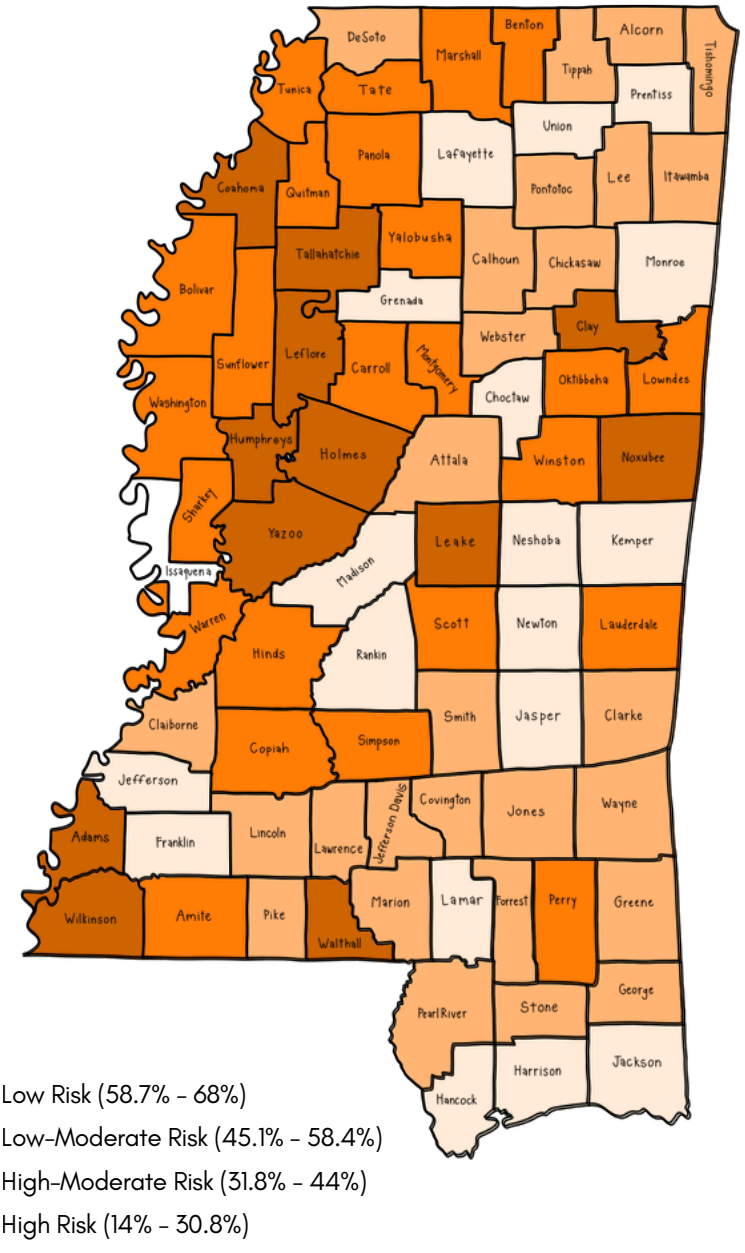


TABLE 5

STUDENTS SCORING PROFICIENT OR ABOVE ON MAAP ELA ASSESSMENT, SPRING 2025

	2025 RATE	2026 RISK		2025 RATE	2026 RISK
Adams	30.8%	4	**Leflore**	28.5%	4
Alcorn	51.2%	2	**Lincoln**	58.1%	2
Amite	33.3%	3	**Lowndes**	40.7%	3
Attala	51.8%	2	**Madison**	60.7%	1
Benton	36.6%	3	**Marion**	48.9%	2
Bolivar	32.1%	3	**Marshall**	39%	3
Calhoun	45.6%	2	**Monroe**	63.3%	1
Carroll	36.4%	3	**Montgomery**	36.7%	3
Chickasaw	45.2%	2	**Neshoba**	61.5%	1
Choctaw	65.2%	1	**Newton**	59.4%	1
Claiborne	32.2%	2	**Noxubee**	18.6%	4
Clarke	50.5%	2	**Oktibbeha**	39.8%	3
Clay	22%	4	**Panola**	36%	3
Coahoma	26.2%	4	**Pearl River**	49%	2
Copiah	41.5%	3	**Perry**	34%	3
Covington	51.3%	2	**Pike**	46%	2
DeSoto	50.8%	2	**Pontotoc**	52.2%	2
Forrest	58.4%	2	**Prentiss**	58.9%	1
Franklin	63%	1	**Quitman**	38%	3
George	55.7%	2	**Rankin**	66.7%	1
Greene	47.1%	2	**Scott**	39.7%	3
Grenada	67.1%	1	**Sharkey**	31.8%	3
Hancock	62.4%	1	**Simpson**	34.5%	3
Harrison	62.2%	1	**Smith**	53.1%	2
Hinds	36.5%	3	**Stone**	54.1%	2
Holmes	30.6%	4	**Sunflower**	39.7%	3
Humphreys	14%	4	**Tallahatchie**	24.8%	4
Issaquena			**Tate**	40.5%	3
Itawamba	52.1%	2	**Tippah**	48.9%	2
Jackson	59%	1	**Tishomingo**	51.3%	2
Jasper	59.5%	1	**Tunica**	43.4%	3
Jefferson	58.7%	1	**Union**	61.5%	1
Jefferson Davis	45.1%	2	**Walthall**	21.7%	4
Jones	45.7%	2	**Warren**	44%	3
Kemper	68%	1	**Washington**	40.9%	3
Lafayette	64.3%	1	**Wayne**	46.4%	2
Lamar	62.5%	1	**Webster**	52.8%	2
Lauderdale	41.1%	3	**Wilkinson**	20%	4
Lawrence	50%	2	**Winston**	39.3%	3
Leake	18.2%	4	**Yalobusha**	34.7%	3
Lee	48.2%	2	**Yazoo**	17.8%	4

EDUCATION RISK FACTOR:
MATH SKILLS

Early math skills are more than just numbers and counting. Math involves logic, spatial reasoning, problem solving, pattern recognition, and more. Put differently, math is organized thinking. As children build confidence in early math skills, topics such as science, music, and even writing become much easier to grasp.[40] Like early proficiency in literacy, early math proficiency is linked to higher graduation rates, steady employment opportunities, and higher lifetime earnings.[41] These gains benefit not just our students but ripple out into our communities.

MDE's 2024-2025 MAAP report showed 53.3% of third-graders were proficient in mathematics. County level proficiency rates ranged from 80.4% in Lafayette County to 10% in Wilkinson County.

As with ELA proficiency, counties with the highest proficiency rates were assigned low risk scores, and vice versa. Proficiency rates in 15 counties, including Lafayette, were at or above 65.4% (Jackson County) and lowest at-risk. Third-graders in twelve high-risk counties, including Wilkinson, were proficient in math at or below Lauderdale County's rate of 32.6%.[42]

Two counties significantly improved their risk scores from the last report. Amite and Jefferson Davis Counties moved from a level 4 to a level 2 risk. Meanwhile, Carroll and Neshoba Counties saw increased risk scores; Carroll County from a level 2 to a level 4 risk, while Neshoba County decreased from a level 1 to a level 3 risk.

MAP 8

STUDENTS SCORING PROFICIENT OR ABOVE ON MAAP MATH ASSESSMENT, SPRING 2025

- Low Risk (65.4% - 80.4%)
- Low-Moderate Risk (52.4% - 64.8%)
- High-Moderate Risk (35.5% - 49.6%)
- High Risk (10% - 32.6%)

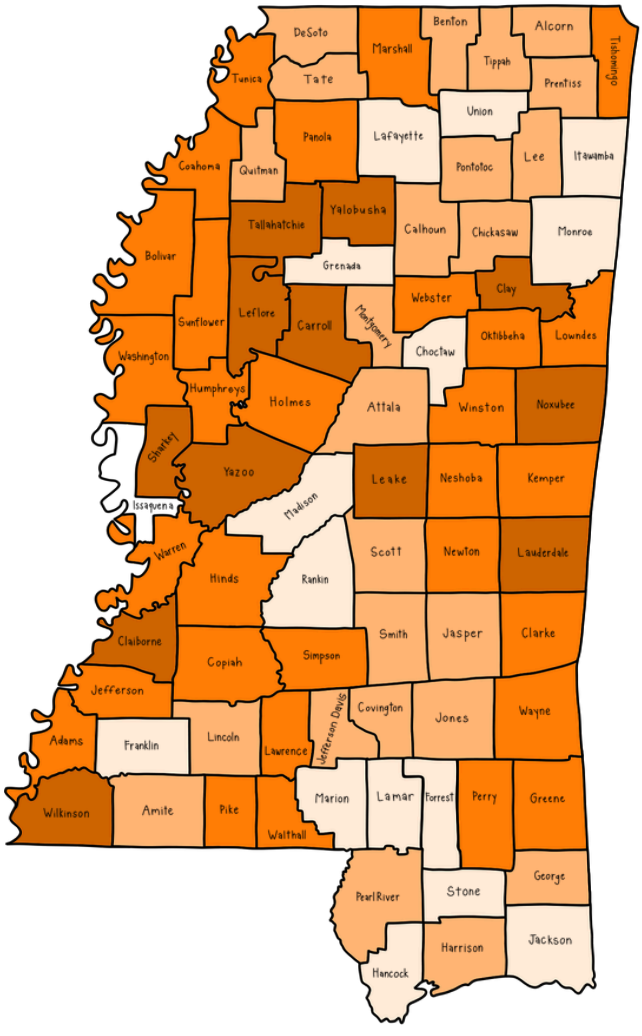


TABLE 6

STUDENTS SCORING PROFICIENT OR ABOVE ON MAAP MATH ASSESSMENT, SPRING 2019 & 2025

	2019 RATE	2021 RISK	2025 RATE	2026 RISK		2019 RATE	2021 RISK	2025 RATE	2026 RISK
Adams	33%	3	36.8%	3	**Leflore**	26.6%	4	15%	4
Alcorn	61.9%	1	55.7%	2	**Lincoln**	36.5%	3	58.2%	2
Amite	15.8%	4	57.7%	2	**Lowndes**	46.5%	2	45.1%	3
Attala	58.2%	2	64.6%	2	**Madison**	66.2%	1	66%	1
Benton	66.7%	1	57.7%	2	**Marion**	58.8%	2	66%	1
Bolivar	23.6%	4	38.8%	3	**Marshall**	33.4%	3	42.3%	3
Calhoun	38.9%	3	55.8%	2	**Monroe**	59.3%	2	76.2%	1
Carroll	54.4%	2	20%	4	**Montgomery**	44.2%	3	53.3%	2
Chickasaw	60.4%	2	52.4%	2	**Neshoba**	62.4%	1	49.1%	3
Choctaw	50.9%	2	71.7%	1	**Newton**	59.8%	2	48.9%	3
Claiborne	21.6%	4	18.2%	4	**Noxubee**	19.2%	4	14.4%	4
Clarke	47.5%	2	44%	3	**Oktibbeha**	46%	3	45.8%	3
Clay	41.1%	3	32.4%	4	**Panola**	55.2%	2	47.2%	3
Coahoma	23.4%	4	36.4%	3	**Pearl River**	40.5%	3	55.9%	2
Copiah	43.7%	3	46%	3	**Perry**	38.9%	3	43.4%	3
Covington	37.7%	3	52.6%	2	**Pike**	47.4%	2	48.2%	3
DeSoto	60.4%	2	53.1%	2	**Pontotoc**	69.5%	1	64.8%	2
Forrest	56.7%	2	68.2%	1	**Prentiss**	56.4%	2	58.6%	2
Franklin	48%	2	71.4%	1	**Quitman**	58.4%	2	62%	2
George	38%	3	57.8%	2	**Rankin**	62.3%	1	66.8%	1
Greene	46%	3	49.6%	3	**Scott**	51.2%	2	57%	2
Grenada	71.9%	1	73.5%	1	**Sharkey**	28.4%	4	31.8%	4
Hancock	57.8%	2	68.6%	1	**Simpson**	41%	3	37.1%	3
Harrison	63.6%	1	61.4%	2	**Smith**	66.7%	1	56.1%	2
Hinds	36.8%	3	35.5%	3	**Stone**	60.6%	2	69.6%	1
Holmes	16.5%	4	45.6%	3	**Sunflower**	51.3%	2	42.4%	3
Humphreys	16.8%	4	36%	3	**Tallahatchie**	15.1%	4	22.1%	4
Issaquena					**Tate**	53.3%	2	58.8%	2
Itawamba	51.9%	2	72.3%	1	**Tippah**	53.3%	2	58.5%	2
Jackson	59%	2	65.4%	1	**Tishomingo**	57.5%	2	47.8%	3
Jasper	50.8%	2	55.8%	2	**Tunica**	45.2%	3	48.1%	3
Jefferson	18.8%	4	45.1%	3	**Union**	76.3%	1	75.8%	1
Jefferson Davis	27.6%	4	57.3%	2	**Walthall**	34.6%	3	42%	3
Jones	50%	2	54.7%	2	**Warren**	48.1%	2	42.5%	3
Kemper	23.6%	4	44%	3	**Washington**	38.2%	3	40.7%	3
Lafayette	80.5%	1	80.4%	1	**Wayne**	31.3%	3	40.7%	3
Lamar	68.6%	1	66.3%	1	**Webster**	48.8%	2	48%	3
Lauderdale	40.4%	3	32.6%	4	**Wilkinson**	38.3%	3	10%	4
Lawrence	53.9%	2	45.8%	3	**Winston**	49.5%	2	45.6%	3
Leake	24.9%	4	23%	4	**Yalobusha**	32.4%	3	31.2%	4
Lee	60%	2	52.6%	2	**Yazoo**	32.3%	3	28.6%	4

EDUCATION RISK FACTOR:
HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION

High school graduation increases the likelihood of stable employment and upward economic mobility; moreover, it decreases the risk of incarceration and poor health outcomes.[43] In 2020, high school graduates working full time earned almost 25% more than those without a high school degree.[44] One way to reduce the number of students who do not graduate is to reduce chronic absenteeism in schools. Chronic absenteeism–or repeated, unexcused absence from school for 10% or more of the time enrolled–is an early warning indicator that a child is disengaged from learning. When absenteeism is not addressed early, it becomes more and more difficult for a student to catch up on missed learning. Potential causes of absenteeism include a lack of academic interest or support; financial or racial inequities that contribute to issues like a lack of transportation, clean clothing, or adequate healthcare; and/or feelings of not belonging or being unsafe.[45]

Holistic approaches to chronic absenteeism that involve academic and counseling support, in addition to solutions like school closets and health clinics, have demonstrated success in reducing the number of school days students miss.[46] The more support for children and families, including early literacy and math opportunities, the stronger will be our children's developmental foundation and their likelihood for high school graduation, resulting in a stronger, healthier Mississippi.

Mississippi's high school graduation rate is on the rise. Mississippi's 2024-2025 four-year high school graduation rate was 89.2% versus the latest available national average of 87% in 2022. Graduation rates among the state's counties ranged from 97%, in DeSoto County, to 68.2%, in Wilkinson County. DeSoto, and twelve other counties with graduation rates meeting or exceeding 94.1% (Neshoba), had the lowest risk for this indicator. Graduation rates in the twelve counties at or below 82.1%, in Leake, had the highest risk.[47]

Since 2021, risk for this indicator has significantly improved for nine counties: Benton County's risk score dropped from 4 to 1; Choctaw, Holmes, and Warren counties saw their risk scores fall from 4 to 2. Scores in Clarke, Forrest, Sharkey, Tippah, and Winston, decreased from 3 to 1.

Scores in seven counties declined significantly. Clay County's risk score rose from 1 to 4. In Montgomery and Scott Counties, risk rose from 2 to 4. Scores in Prentiss, Smith, Tallahatchie, and Webster Counties all rose from a risk score of 1 to 3.

Counties Making Strides in High School Graduation Rates

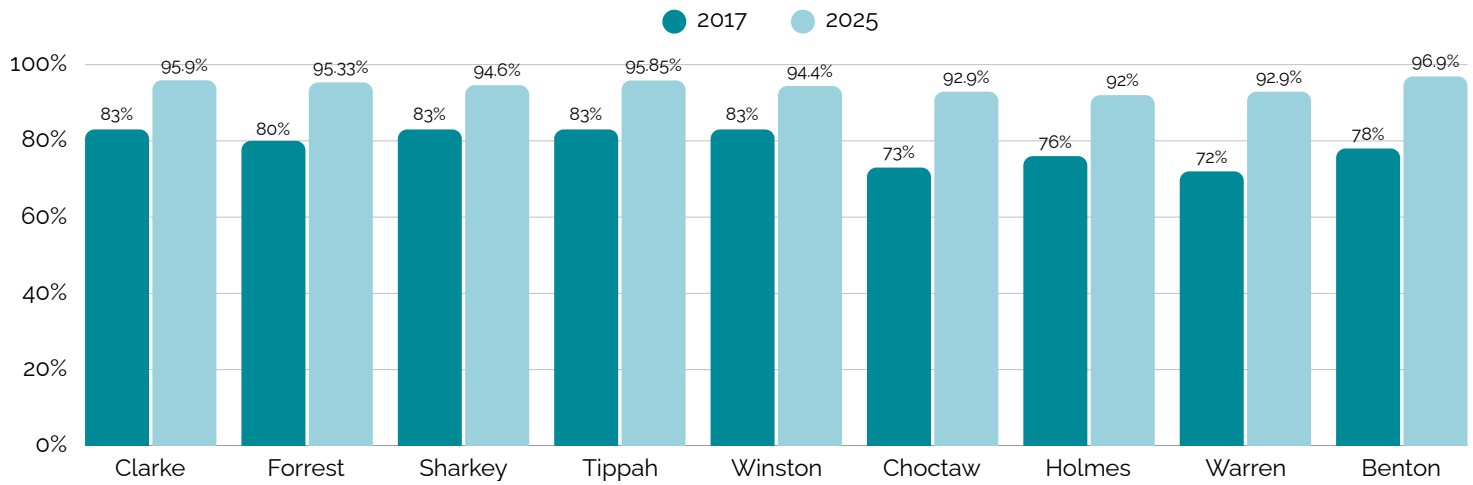


TABLE 7

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES, 2017 & 2025

	2017 RATE	2021 RISK	2025 RATE	2026 RISK		2017 RATE	2021 RISK	2025 RATE	2026 RISK
Adams	80%	3	86.2%	3	**Leflore**	75%	4	82.6%	3
Alcorn	88%	1	92.4%	2	**Lincoln**	81%	3	85.5%	3
Amite	no data	no data	87.7%	3	**Lowndes**	88%	1	88.1%	2
Attala	83%	3	89.7%	2	**Madison**	85%	2	83.7%	3
Benton	78%	4	96.9%	1	**Marion**	82%	3	88.95%	2
Bolivar	82%	3	80.23%	4	**Marshall**	81%	3	91.7%	2
Calhoun	88%	1	89.4%	2	**Monroe**	88%	1	88.9%	2
Carroll	83%	3	88.9%	2	**Montgomery**	84%	2	78.7%	4
Chickasaw	84%	2	89.8%	2	**Neshoba**	80%	3	89.5%	2
Choctaw	73%	4	92.9%	2	**Newton**	84%	2	95.47%	1
Claiborne	88%	1	92.5%	2	**Noxubee**	73%	4	81.3%	4
Clarke	83%	3	95.9%	1	**Oktibbeha**	90%	1	88.3%	2
Clay	88%	1	75.6%	4	**Panola**	85%	2	84.7%	3
Coahoma	74%	4	84.45%	3	**Pearl River**	85%	2	88.73%	2
Copiah	79%	3	82.05%	4	**Perry**	77%	4	86.45%	3
Covington	80%	3	82.3%	3	**Pike**	80%	3	82.47%	3
DeSoto	89%	1	97%	1	**Pontotoc**	82%	3	88.15%	2
Forrest	80%	3	95.33%	1	**Prentiss**	88%	1	85.27%	3
Franklin	83%	3	89.1%	2	**Quitman**	83%	3	85.4%	3
George	89%	1	95.7%	1	**Rankin**	89%	1	94.95%	1
Greene	88%	1	93.2%	2	**Scott**	84%	2	80.35%	4
Grenada	83%	3	91.2%	2	**Sharkey**	83%	3	94.6%	1
Hancock	83%	3	91.75%	2	**Simpson**	81%	3	84.1%	3
Harrison	85%	2	91.38%	2	**Smith**	88%	1	85.2%	3
Hinds	74%	4	85.43%	3	**Stone**	88%	1	91%	2
Holmes	76%	4	92%	2	**Sunflower**	77%	4	85.1%	3
Humphreys	83%	3	74.2%	4	**Tallahatchie**	90%	1	83.45%	3
Issaquena					**Tate**	82%	3	87.9%	2
Itawamba	84%	2	90.1%	2	**Tippah**	83%	3	95.85%	1
Jackson	87%	2	92.2%	2	**Tishomingo**	84%	2	90.7%	2
Jasper	83%	3	90.15%	2	**Tunica**	88%	1	89.4%	2
Jefferson	88%	1	89.7%	2	**Union**	83%	3	90.95%	2
~~Jefferson Davis~~	83%	3	90.2%	2	**Walthall**	78%	4	79.9%	4
Jones	85%	2	87.7%	3	**Warren**	72%	4	92.9%	2
Kemper	93%	1	96.8%	1	**Washington**	77%	4	82.23%	4
Lafayette	87%	2	91.6%	2	**Wayne**	79%	3	92%	2
Lamar	92%	1	91.2%	2	**Webster**	88%	1	87.5%	3
Lauderdale	82%	3	89.4%	2	**Wilkinson**	78%	4	68.2%	4
Lawrence	83%	3	80.6%	4	**Winston**	83%	3	94.4%	1
Leake	78%	4	82.1%	4	**Yalobusha**	87%	2	85.15%	3
Lee	84%	2	86.33%	3	**Yazoo**	75%	4	77.4%	4

FAMILY & COMMUNITY RISK FACTOR:
YOUTH INCARCERATION

When youth under the age of 18 commit a crime in Mississippi, they are tried in youth court, a separate justice system from adults. Developmentally, youth are less culpable than their elders because the human brain does not finish developing until well into a person's twenties. Due to brain architecture and limited life experience, children are more comfortable with risk-taking and may have an underdeveloped sense of responsibility.[48]

Many youth who commit crimes are facing obstacles beyond biology; children who experience poverty are twice as likely to commit crime. Additionally, research shows that the children most likely to enact self-destructive and criminal behaviors are those who have experienced abuse or trauma or have witnessed violence.[49]

The juvenile justice system was created to ensure that children get a fair chance at a good future; however, it can have compounding negative repercussions for children, such as a decreased likelihood of graduating high school.[50]

While the causes for childhood criminal behavior are varied, reducing rates of childhood poverty is shown to decrease rates of criminal activity.

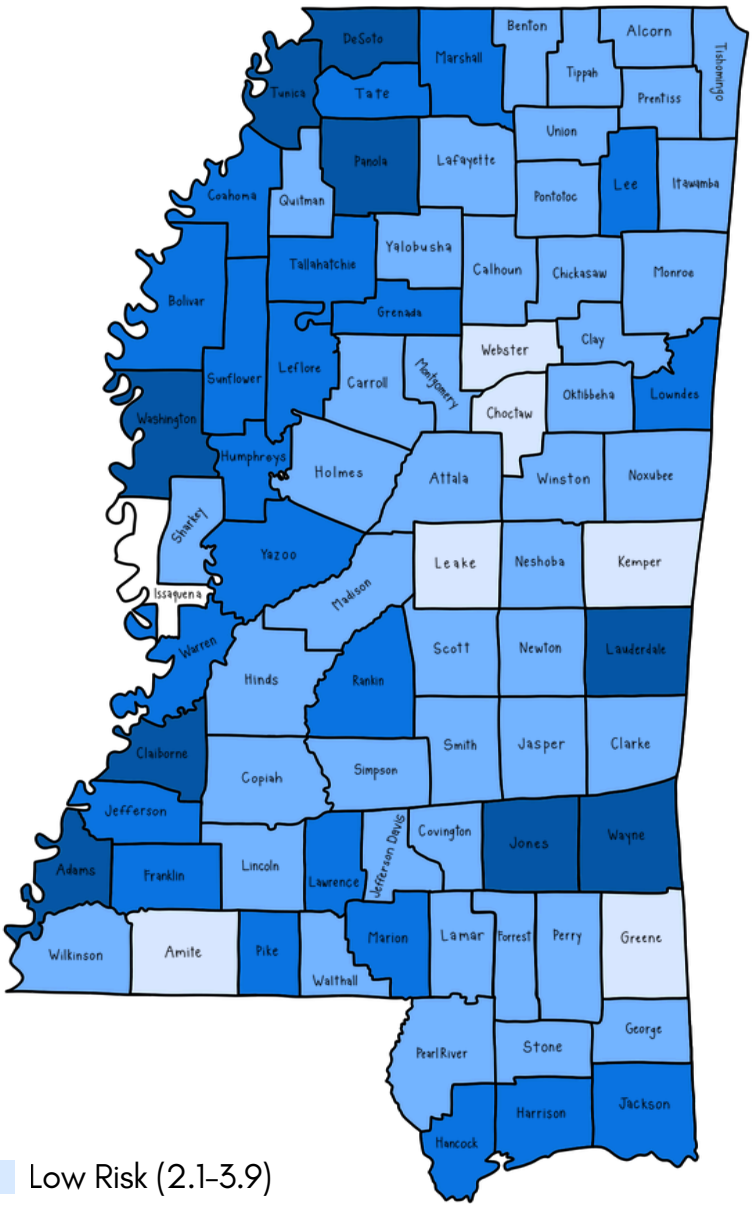
There is a statistically significant correlation between the rates of early childhood poverty and juvenile justice referrals presented in this report.[51]

The incidence of juvenile justice referrals for Mississippi's children in 2024 was 19.4 per 1,000 children. The highest rate, 69.5 referrals per 1,000 children, in Tunica County was considered highest at risk, as well as eight additional counties, including the lower-bound, 31.4 per 1,000 children, in Panola. Six counties merited a low-risk rating, having rates falling in the range from the lowest, 2.1 referrals, in Choctaw, to 3.9 referrals, in Leake County.[52]

Risk scores in four counties have varied significantly since the last report. Montgomery and Walthall Counties' scores each improved from a level 4 to a level 2 risk, while those in Claiborne and Wayne Counties each moved from a level 2 risk to a level 4 risk. Table 8 reflects current data only, as minimal change was observed since the previous reporting period.

TABLE 8 AND MAP 9

JUVENILE JUSTICE REFERRAL RATE, 2024



- Low Risk (2.1-3.9)
- Low-Moderate Risk (4.7-17)
- High-Moderate Risk (17.2-27.2)
- High Risk (31.4-69.5)

	2024 RATE PER 1,000	2026 RISK		2024 RATE PER 1,000	2026 RISK
Adams	45.2	4	**Leflore**	17.2	3
Alcorn	16	2	**Lincoln**	6.6	2
Amite	3.3	1	**Lowndes**	22.8	3
Attala	14.4	2	**Madison**	15.9	2
Benton	16.9	2	**Marion**	25.2	3
Bolivar	20	3	**Marshall**	19	3
Calhoun	9.8	2	**Monroe**	10.6	2
Carroll	5.3	2	**Montgomery**	5.2	2
Chickasaw	8.3	2	**Neshoba**	13.7	2
Choctaw	2.1	1	**Newton**	4.7	2
Claiborne	49.9	4	**Noxubee**	7.9	2
Clarke	17	2	**Oktibbeha**	10.8	2
Clay	4.7	2	**Panola**	31.4	4
Coahoma	21.7	3	**Pearl River**	7.1	2
Copiah	6.3	2	**Perry**	7	2
Covington	15.9	2	**Pike**	24.6	3
DeSoto	35.4	4	**Pontotoc**	11	2
Forrest	12.8	2	**Prentiss**	13.8	2
Franklin	23.1	3	**Quitman**	9.2	2
George	8.6	2	**Rankin**	20.4	3
Greene	2.2	1	**Scott**	10	2
Grenada	17.3	3	**Sharkey**	14.3	2
Hancock	18.5	3	**Simpson**	8.8	2
Harrison	27.2	3	**Smith**	11	2
Hinds	8.6	2	**Stone**	7.1	2
Holmes	16.3	2	**Sunflower**	20.7	3
Humphreys	24.3	3	**Tallahatchie**	23.3	3
Issaquena			**Tate**	24.1	3
Itawamba	10.3	2	**Tippah**	12.4	2
Jackson	18	3	**Tishomingo**	12	2
Jasper	6.1	2	**Tunica**	69.5	4
Jefferson	27	3	**Union**	5.8	2
Jefferson Davis	8.7	2	**Walthall**	16	2
Jones	52.2	4	**Warren**	22.9	3
Kemper	3.7	1	**Washington**	32.5	4
Lafayette	13.3	2	**Wayne**	52.9	4
Lamar	15	2	**Webster**	3	1
Lauderdale	32	4	**Wilkinson**	12.8	2
Lawrence	21.7	3	**Winston**	12.3	2
Leake	3.9	1	**Yalobusha**	11.9	2
Lee	22.6	3	**Yazoo**	24	3

FAMILY & COMMUNITY RISK FACTOR:

SINGLE-PARENT HOUSEHOLDS

Single-parent households deal with a stacked set of stresses, many of them financial, emotional, or relating to time scarcity. With only one earner in the family, housing, food, healthcare, and schooling costs account for a bigger share of income; with little of a paycheck left to save, a single emergency can decimate a family's financial cushion. Single parents cannot afford to miss work, and yet, these same parents will struggle hardest to secure affordable child care. While early child care can be expensive for two-parent households (about 7% of the median income for married couples), child care can account for as much as 15% of a single father's income and as much as 25% of a single mother's income.[53,54]

Early child care support yields numerous returns for child and parent alike; children receive emotional support from additional caring adults as well as academic support that propels future success, and parents are able to remain rooted in the workforce.

The American Community Survey's 5-year, 2019-2024, estimates showed 37% of Mississippi's children lived in a single-parent household, versus 25% nationally. Sixty-nine Mississippi counties exceeded the national rate of single-parenthood, with 17 of those counties having rates of single-parenthood 50% or greater. Among these, 14 counties having single-parent household rates between 72%, in Jefferson County, and 53%, in Carroll, were ranked high risk. Pontotoc (22%) and Alcorn County (26%) bracketed the upper and lower bounds of the 15 low-risk counties.[55]

Yazoo County was the only county whose risk score for single-parent families decreased significantly, moving from a level 4 risk to a level 2 risk. Meanwhile, Carroll County increased significantly, from a level 1 risk to a level 4 risk.

MAP 10

PERCENT OF CHILDREN LIVING IN SINGLE PARENT FAMILIES, 2019-2024

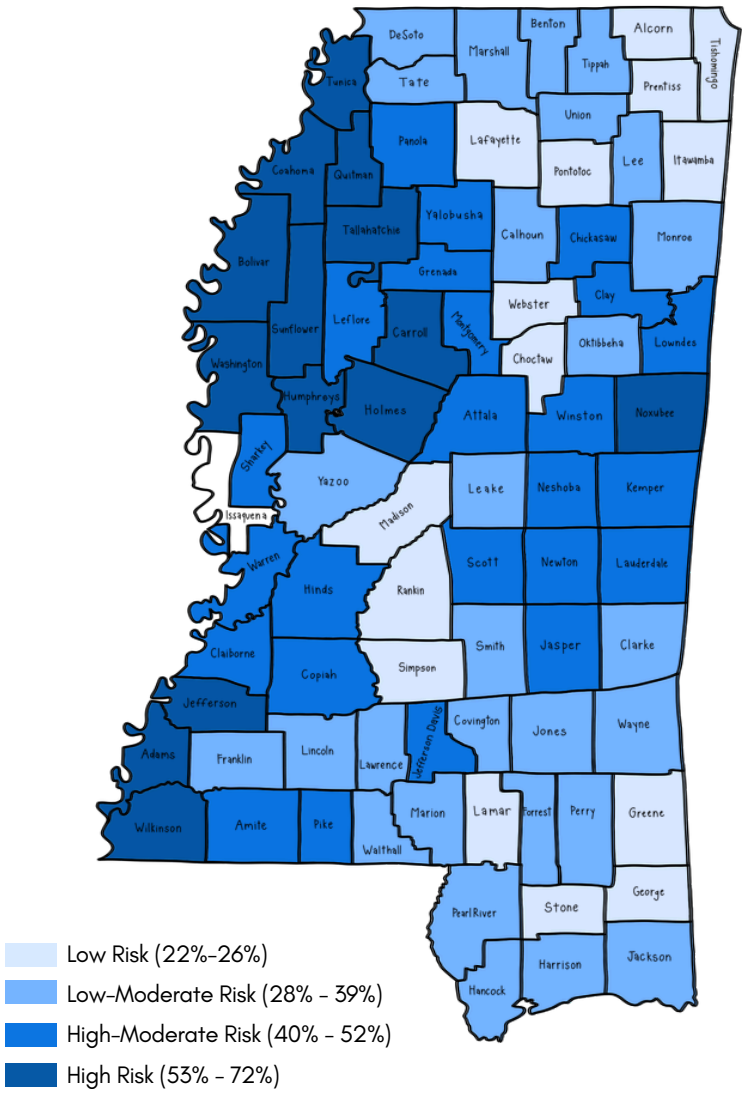


TABLE 9

SINGLE-PARENT HOUSEHOLDS, 2018 & 2024

	2018 RATE	2021 RISK	2024 RATE	2026 RISK		2018 RATE	2021 RISK	2024 RATE	2026 RISK
Adams	66.4%	4	54%	4	**Leflore**	65.1%	4	51%	3
Alcorn	29.6%	1	26%	1	**Lincoln**	38.9%	2	31%	2
Amite	40%	2	47%	3	**Lowndes**	45.4%	2	43%	3
Attala	43.7%	2	44%	3	**Madison**	34.9%	2	24%	1
Benton	34.4%	2	33%	2	**Marion**	38.1%	2	37%	2
Bolivar	62.7%	4	53%	4	**Marshall**	44.4%	2	32%	2
Calhoun	42.3%	2	32%	2	**Monroe**	35.4%	2	36%	2
Carroll	28.1%	1	53%	4	**Montgomery**	57.3%	3	42%	3
Chickasaw	44.4%	2	43%	3	**Neshoba**	51.6%	3	41%	3
Choctaw	37.6%	2	25%	1	**Newton**	45.7%	2	42%	3
Claiborne	70.4%	4	44%	3	**Noxubee**	55.2%	3	65%	4
Clarke	39.7%	2	34%	2	**Oktibbeha**	41.3%	2	38%	2
Clay	56.8%	3	48%	3	**Panola**	40.7%	2	47%	3
Coahoma	71%	4	58%	4	**Pearl River**	31.2%	1	30%	2
Copiah	48.4%	3	44%	3	**Perry**	34.8%	2	38%	2
Covington	41.8%	2	28%	2	**Pike**	60.9%	4	49%	3
DeSoto	31.4%	1	28%	2	**Pontotoc**	41.2%	2	22%	1
Forrest	47.5%	3	34%	2	**Prentiss**	31.7%	1	25%	1
Franklin	38.3%	2	38%	2	**Quitman**	66.3%	4	57%	4
George	22%	1	25%	1	**Rankin**	25.5%	1	25%	1
Greene	28.6%	1	22%	1	**Scott**	54.3%	3	46%	3
Grenada	51.6%	3	42%	3	**Sharkey**	61.9%	4	49%	3
Hancock	40%	2	33%	2	**Simpson**	41.6%	2	25%	1
Harrison	44.1%	2	35%	2	**Smith**	29.5%	1	30%	2
Hinds	58.1%	3	50%	3	**Stone**	30%	1	23%	1
Holmes	79.9%	4	62%	4	**Sunflower**	65%	4	61%	4
Humphreys	74.2%	4	57%	4	**Tallahatchie**	62.4%	4	61%	4
Issaquena	42%	2			**Tate**	44.4%	2	36%	2
Itawamba	28%	1	24%	1	**Tippah**	36.4%	2	29%	2
Jackson	39.4%	2	28%	2	**Tishomingo**	24%	1	24%	1
Jasper	56.4%	3	43%	3	**Tunica**	67.9%	4	66%	4
Jefferson	87.2%	4	72%	4	**Union**	31.9%	1	35%	2
Jefferson Davis	53.4%	3	42%	3	**Walthall**	44.2%	2	32%	2
Jones	41.6%	2	32%	2	**Warren**	44.8%	2	41%	3
Kemper	65.9%	4	40%	3	**Washington**	67.1%	4	61%	4
Lafayette	34.5%	2	22%	1	**Wayne**	36.8%	2	39%	2
Lamar	28.7%	1	26%	1	**Webster**	28.6%	1	25%	1
Lauderdale	42.2%	2	45%	3	**Wilkinson**	61.3%	4	64%	4
Lawrence	35.8%	2	34%	2	**Winston**	47.9%	3	52%	3
Leake	51.9%	3	37%	2	**Yalobusha**	42.4%	2	45%	3
Lee	39.4%	2	32%	2	**Yazoo**	64.9%	4	38%	2

FAMILY & COMMUNITY RISK FACTOR: FOSTER CARE

Children placed in foster care face complex challenges. Lack of a secure, stable home is intrinsically detrimental to children, and gaps within the foster system can exacerbate health and development challenges. Children placed in foster care are at greater risk for medical, mental, and developmental issues. Moreover, once in foster care, they are likely to receive delayed diagnoses or face healthcare disruptions due to encountering multiple caregivers who may lack access to the child's medical history and/or their upcoming appointments.

In 2024, 23% of children in MDCPS custody for fewer than 12 months experienced 3 or more foster home placements, as compared to 66% of children in custody longer than 2 years. The median length of stay in foster care that same year was 11.2 months, the fewest among our neighboring states.[56]

The incidence of children in Mississippi's foster care system, in 2025, was 50 per 10,000, comprising 3,831 individuals. High risk scores were assigned to 14 counties, with rates ranging from 151 per 10,000, in Stone County, to 97 per 10,000, in Jefferson Davis.

An equal number of counties were rated low risk, whose rates were from 73 per 10,000, in Tunica, to zero in Sharkey County. Notably, Sharkey has one of the smallest numbers of children among all counties; Montgomery County, having a significantly larger child population, reported the lowest nonzero rate at 7 per 10,000. Care should be taken when interpreting extremes in data from counties with low population counts.[57]

Risk scores for three counties have improved significantly since 2021. In Marion, Marshall, and Tippah Counties, risk scores decreased from 4 to 2. These counties made significant strides in improving the rates of children in foster care. In Marion, the number of children in foster care decreased from 137 to 45 children; in Marshall, from 152 to 44 children; and in Tippah, from 149 to 55 children.

Conversely, nine counties showed a significant increase in risk for this indicator. In Wayne County, risk rose from a 1 to a risk score of 4. In Calhoun, Clarke, Jefferson Davis, and Sunflower Counties, risk rose considerably, from 2 to 4, followed by Bolivar, Leflore, and Noxubee Counties, with risks raised from 1 to 3.

Reach Roots: Vicksburg Warren County Youth Development Center

Children and youth navigating unstable environments, including those involved in or at risk of entering the foster care system, often face gaps in support that can impact their health, development, and long-term outcomes. In Warren County, the Vicksburg Warren County Youth Development Center (YDC) has been recognized as a 2026 Reach Awardee for its role in providing coordinated, community-based support for young people and their families.

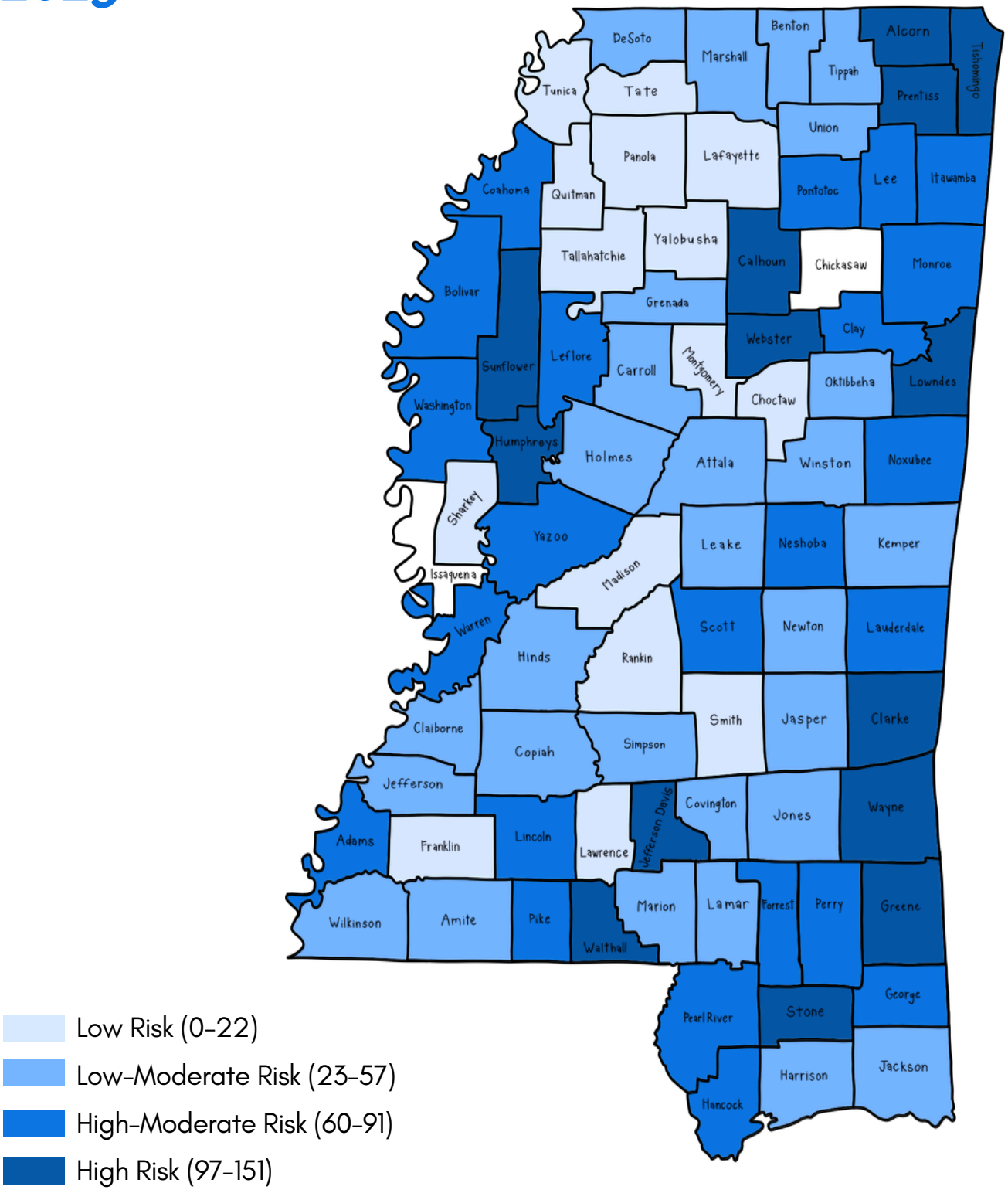
The Youth Development Center takes a comprehensive approach to identifying and addressing the needs of youth through a centralized intake process that connects individuals to academic support, mentoring, mental health services, and other community resources. By working across systems and service providers, YDC helps ensure that young people receive more consistent, aligned support.

Through partnerships with schools, families, community agencies, and local leaders, YDC strengthens communication and coordination among those involved in a child's care. This type of structure helps reduce gaps in services and creates a more stable network of support for youth who may otherwise experience disruption across multiple environments.

In Warren County, efforts like these play an important role in helping young people remain connected to the resources, relationships, and support systems they need to navigate challenges and move toward more stable, positive outcomes.

MAP 11

CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE, PER 10,000 CHILDREN, 2025



- Low Risk (0–22)
- Low–Moderate Risk (23–57)
- High–Moderate Risk (60–91)
- High Risk (97–151)

FAMILY & COMMUNITY RISK FACTOR:

CHILD MALTREATMENT & NEGLECT

Childhood is a critical period when the brain and body are rapidly growing; consequently, abuse and neglect experienced throughout this period can have outsized and enduring effects on a child's development. Chronic abuse and neglect can contribute to toxic stress in young children, which triggers prolonged activation of hormones like cortisol and causes the amygdala (fear center of the brain) to become hyper-reactive. Other areas of the brain responsible for decision-making, impulse control, attention, and emotional regulation see reduced development. Difficulty regulating emotions, concentrating, and planning can have lifelong effects on a child's future ability to manage the stressors of life and maintain careers and relationships.[1]

Mississippi's children, in 2023, experienced maltreatment at a rate of 43.5 per 10,000, which is a decrease by 57.6% since 2021.

Among the nine high-risk counties, Benton had the highest incidence, at 89.5 per 10,000, with the lower extreme in Hancock County, at 60.3 per 10,000. Low-risk counties had rates of child abuse and neglect ranging from 32.3 per 10,000 in Lamar, to 15.8 per 10,000 in Madison County.[58] Note: care should be exercised when interpreting data extremes from counties with relatively small child populations.

Harrison County is the only county that saw a significant improvement in risk score, moving from a risk level of 4 to a risk level of 2.

While four counties increased their risk score, only one of those actually saw a rate increase. Noxubee County moved from a level 1 risk to a level 4 risk due to a near-20-point increase in the rate of child maltreatment. As noted above, the state as a whole has experienced a significant drop in child maltreatment; the following counties experienced decreased rates, but the drops were not as significant as other counties. Simpson and Benton Counties each increased from a level 2 risk to a level 4 risk, while Holmes increased from a level 1 risk to a level 3 risk.

MAP 12

CHILD MALTREATMENT AND NEGLECT PER 10,000, 2023

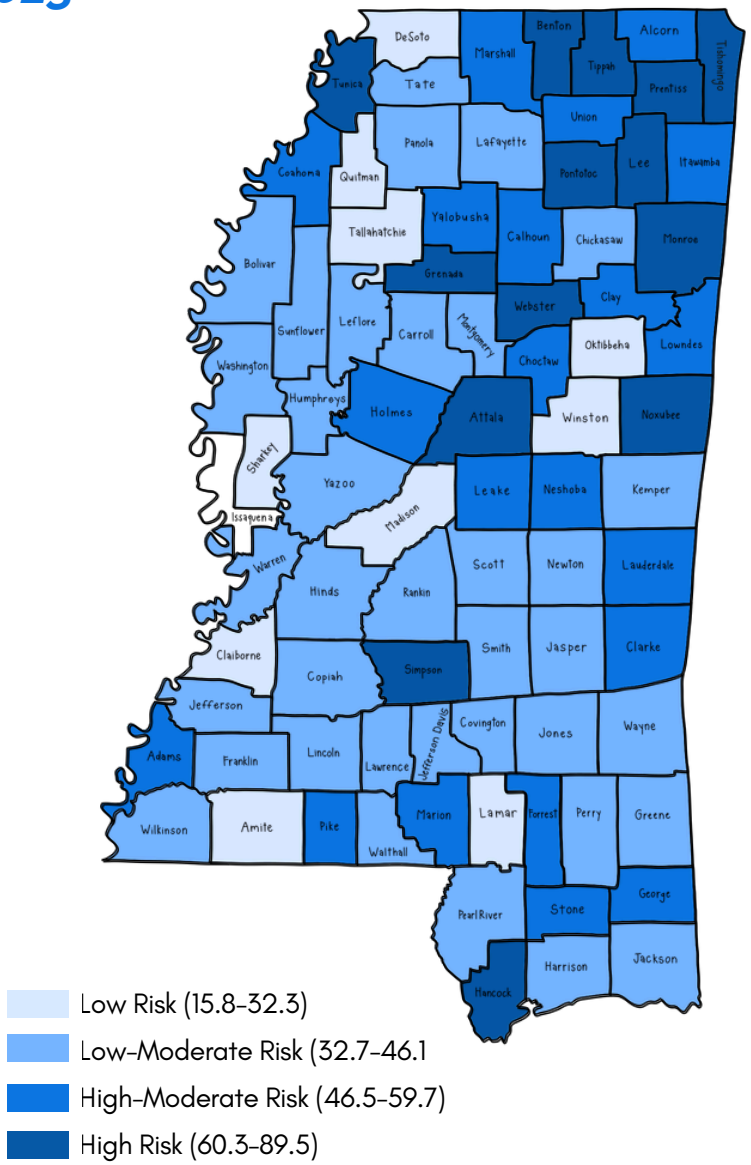


TABLE 10

CHILD MALTREATMENT AND NEGLECT PER 10,000, 2020 & 2023

	2020 RATE PER 10,000	2021 RISK	2023 RATE PER 10,000	2026 RISK		2020 RATE PER 10,000	2021 RISK	2023 RATE PER 10,000	2026 RISK
Adams	176.2	4	59.3	3	Leflore	83.8	2	33.6	2
Alcorn	183.6	4	57.9	3	Lincoln	110.8	3	35.3	2
Amite	89	2	27.9	1	Lowndes	120.3	3	56.5	3
Attala	116.6	3	60.6	4	Madison	45.6	1	15.8	1
Benton	102.5	2	89.5	4	Marion	119.1	3	56.2	3
Bolivar	51.9	1	33.2	2	Marshall	159.2	4	55	3
Calhoun	116.1	3	46.5	3	Monroe	157.4	4	62.4	4
Carroll	63.1	1	33.2	2	Montgomery	73.8	2	44	2
Chickasaw	120	3	41.3	2	Neshoba	125.7	3	48.8	3
Choctaw	164.6	4	59.7	3	Newton	57.7	1	37	2
Claiborne	60.7	1	31.3	1	Noxubee	45.7	1	64.2	4
Clarke	167.5	4	49.3	3	Oktibbeha	78.2	2	25.7	1
Clay	89.6	2	48.2	3	Panola	128.4	3	42.3	2
Coahoma	91	2	47.9	3	Pearl River	120.6	3	46.1	2
Copiah	68.3	2	33.2	2	Perry	67.2	2	45.7	2
Covington	76.1	2	41.2	2	Pike	186.3	4	56	3
DeSoto	104.6	2	30.3	1	Pontotoc	204.8	4	74.8	4
Forrest	92.6	2	52.6	3	Prentiss	173.6	4	72.5	4
Franklin	69.2	2	38.3	2	Quitman	56.3	1	29.3	1
George	120.7	3	47.7	3	Rankin	106.5	2	35.4	2
Greene	121.3	3	45.5	2	Scott	114.2	3	45.2	2
Grenada	145	3	74.1	4	Sharkey	41	41	22.9	1
Hancock	144.3	3	60.3	4	Simpson	94.9	2	61.4	4
Harrison	153.6	4	44.7	2	Smith	71.2	2	46	2
Hinds	110.8	3	35.4	2	Stone	90	2	46.7	3
Holmes	56.9	1	46.6	3	Sunflower	64.9	1	33.8	2
Humphreys	107.7	2	32.7	2	Tallahatchie	75	2	32.1	1
Issaquena					Tate	118.5	3	36.2	2
Itawamba	131.6	3	48.4	3	Tippah	204.5	4	72.8	4
Jackson	88.2	2	39.2	2	Tishomingo	231.3	4	74.9	4
Jasper	65.9	2	41	2	Tunica	121.6	3	68.5	4
Jefferson	55.4	1	34.3	2	Union	176.9	4	55.5	3
Jefferson Davis	124.9	3	39.8	2	Walthall	138.8	3	35.6	2
Jones	109.5	3	43.2	2	Warren	108.8	3	37.7	2
Kemper	62.4	1	44.8	2	Washington	71.6	2	43.8	2
Lafayette	98.9	2	38	2	Wayne	94	2	41.9	2
Lamar	90.2	2	32.3	1	Webster	138.1	3	66.7	4
Lauderdale	145.8	3	53.1	3	Wilkinson	88.9	2	41.3	2
Lawrence	105.8	2	40.1	2	Winston	91.3	2	30.1	1
Leake	71.4	2	50.6	3	Yalobusha	137.1	3	50.8	3
Lee	143.9	3	62.2	4	Yazoo	115.6	3	41.1	2

CUMULATIVE RISK SCORES

Risk rankings were super-scored for each county using their scores from each individual risk category. A final analysis shows that of the 81 counties ranked in this year's report, the risk scores of 57 remained unchanged from 2021. However, of the unchanged scores, ten had scores of 3 and ten had scores of 4, demonstrating marked room for improvement.

Eleven counties saw improvement by 1 risk score, while 13 lost ground by 1. Three counties had super-scores that changed significantly from those in 2021; Walthall's ranking improved from a 4-risk score to a 2, while Carroll's score declined from a 1-risk score to a 3, and the 2-risk score for Wayne County shifted to a 4-risk score overall.

Bearing in mind that risk scores in a single county depend upon the indicator data in every county, the notable risk improvements in Walthall County include:

- Child poverty, from 30.8% to 17.7%
- Food insecurity, from 26.8% to 17.7%, and
- Child maltreatment, from 138.8/10,000 to 35.6/10,000.

In contrast, Carroll County's increased risk was largely attributable to significant increases in:

- Child poverty, from 19.6% to 34.1%,
- Single-parent families, from 28.1% to 53%, and
- Third-grade Math proficiency, from 54.4% to 20%.

Risk in Wayne County increased mainly in response to substantially escalated rates of:

- Child poverty, from 21% to 49.1%,
- Food insecurity, from 24.8% to 49.1%,
- Low birth-weight infants, from 11.8% to 16%,
- Teen births, from 43.9% to 52%, and a
- Kindergarten Readiness average score in the highest risk category.

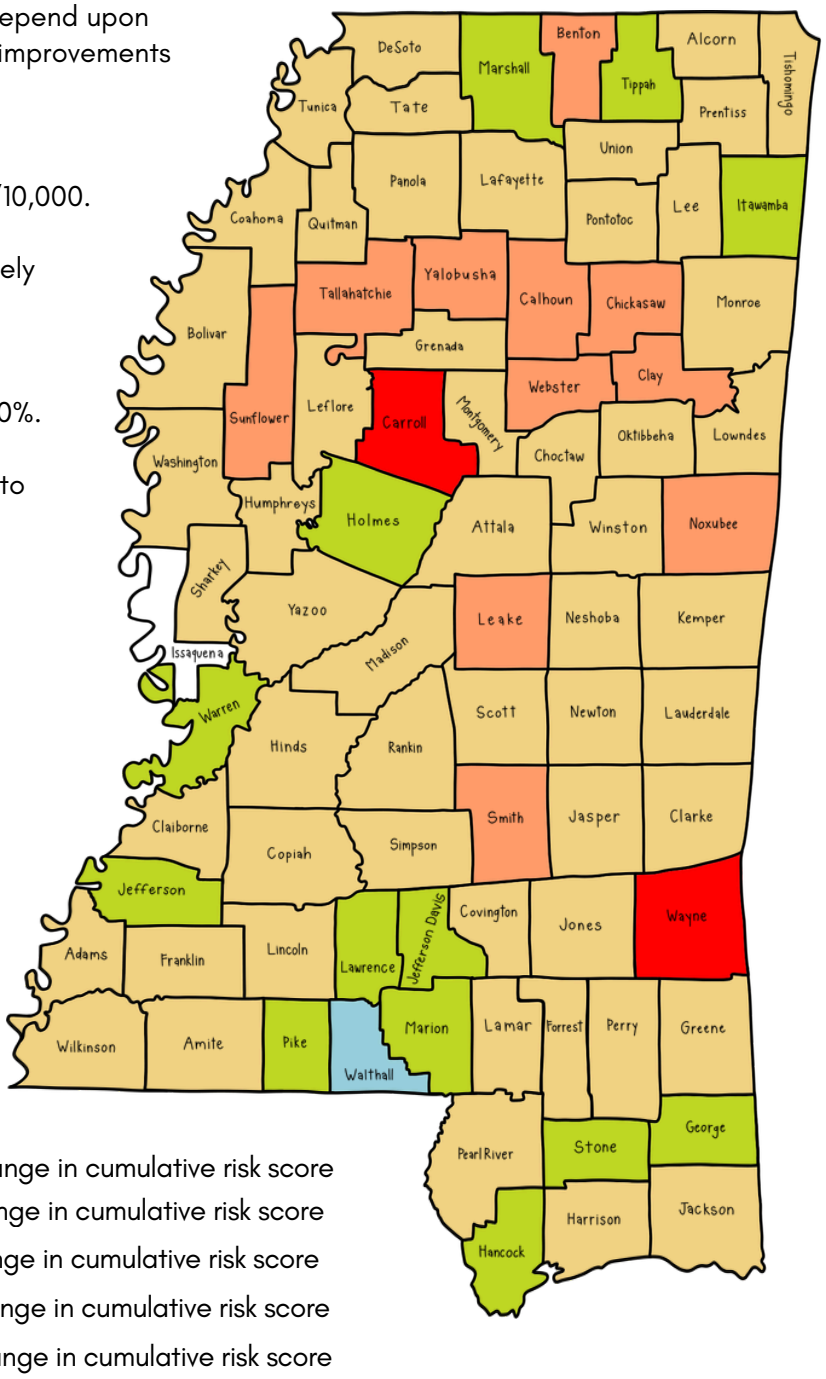


TABLE 11
CUMULATIVE RISK SCORES, 2021 & 2026

	2021 OVERALL RISK	2026 OVERALL RISK	RISK DIFFERENCE		2021 OVERALL RISK	2026 OVERALL RISK	RISK DIFFERENCE
Adams	4	4	0	**Leflore**	4	4	0
Alcorn	2	2	0	**Lincoln**	2	2	0
Amite	2	2	0	**Lowndes**	2	2	0
Attala	2	2	0	**Madison**	1	1	0
Benton	2	3	+1	**Marion**	3	2	-1
Bolivar	3	3	0	**Marshall**	3	2	-1
Calhoun	2	3	+1	**Monroe**	2	2	0
Carroll	1	3	+2	**Montgomery**	3	3	0
Chickasaw	2	3	+1	**Neshoba**	2	2	0
Choctaw	2	2	0	**Newton**	2	2	0
Claiborne	4	4	0	**Noxubee**	3	4	1
Clarke	2	2	0	**Oktibbeha**	1	1	0
Clay	3	4	+1	**Panola**	3	3	0
Coahoma	4	4	0	**Pearl River**	2	2	0
Copiah	3	3	0	**Perry**	2	2	0
Covington	2	2	0	**Pike**	4	3	-1
DeSoto	1	1	0	**Pontotoc**	2	2	0
Forrest	2	2	0	**Prentiss**	2	2	0
Franklin	2	2	0	**Quitman**	3	3	0
George	2	1	-1	**Rankin**	1	1	0
Greene	2	2	0	**Scott**	4	4	0
Grenada	2	2	0	**Sharkey**	3	3	0
Hancock	2	1	-1	**Simpson**	2	2	0
Harrison	2	2	0	**Smith**	1	2	+1
Hinds	3	3	0	**Stone**	2	1	-1
Holmes	4	3	-1	**Sunflower**	3	4	+1
Humphreys	4	4	0	**Tallahatchie**	3	4	+1
Issaquena				**Tate**	2	2	0
Itawamba	2	1	-1	**Tippah**	3	2	-1
Jackson	1	1	0	**Tishomingo**	2	2	0
Jasper	2	2	0	**Tunica**	4	4	0
Jefferson	4	3	-1	**Union**	1	1	0
Jefferson Davis	3	2	-1	**Walthall**	4	2	-2
Jones	3	3	0	**Warren**	3	2	-1
Kemper	3	3	0	**Washington**	4	4	0
Lafayette	1	1	0	**Wayne**	2	4	+2
Lamar	1	1	0	**Webster**	2	3	+1
Lauderdale	3	3	0	**Wilkinson**	4	4	0
Lawrence	3	2	-1	**Winston**	2	2	0
Leake	3	4	1	**Yalobusha**	2	3	+1
Lee	2	2	0	**Yazoo**	4	4	0

REACH FACTORS

The Reach section highlights how communities across Mississippi are responding to needs in health, education, economic stability, and family and community life in meaningful ways. While the Risk section examines these factors individually to better understand where challenges exist, the Reach section reflects a whole-child approach, recognizing that children and families often need support across multiple areas at once. Across the state, organizations are working to meet needs, close gaps, and create opportunities for children and families to grow and thrive.

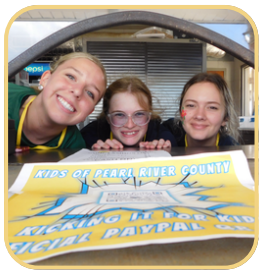
In late 2025, the Children's Foundation of Mississippi opened a statewide nomination process to identify individuals and organizations making a meaningful impact in their communities. Through outreach, conversations, and information gathering across Mississippi, we worked to better understand what support looks like on the ground, where gaps exist, and who is stepping in to meet those needs.

From this process, 80 Reach awardees were identified, representing work that reaches all 82 counties across the state. These awardees reflect real examples of community-driven impact. While this list is not exhaustive, it highlights the people and organizations that community members themselves identified as doing important, meaningful work. Their efforts offer insight into what is possible when communities invest in their children and families, and they provide models that can inform and inspire similar work across Mississippi.

Together, these awardees serve an estimated 96,870 children and 14,837 families across the state, demonstrating that in every corner of Mississippi, there are individuals and organizations showing up to support children and families and help them thrive.

Delta Nature and Learning Center

Marion County Advisory Council



Kids of Pearl River County

Creative Starts

Coats 4 Kidz

Junior League of Covington County

Choctaw County Library

CURRage 2 Change

Jefferson County Early Learning Collaborative

Catholic Charities of Vardaman

Operation Shoestring

Family Biz Builder

G.O.A.T. CAMPS

Waynesboro-Wayne County Library

REACH FACTOR:
WRAPAROUND SUPPORT GIVES CHILDREN AND FAMILIES HOPE

Civic groups, community coalitions, and community-based organizations play a vital role in strengthening Mississippi's children and families by responding to a wide range of local needs. **Delta Health Alliance Delta Dads, DeSoto Dream Center, Excel, Inc., Junior League of Covington County, Jefferson Davis County Community Impact Coalition, Junior Auxiliary of Water Valley, Eupora Rotary Club, SoulFed Community Outreach, MS Coats 4 Kidz, Kids of Pearl River County, Marion County Advisory Council, Legacy Education and Community Empowerment Foundation, Inc., Ever Reaching Community Outreach, Hope Community Collective, Sleep in Heavenly Peace MS-Pike County, Macon Rotary Club,** and the **George County MS MILC League** reflect a shared commitment to service, leadership, and community investment.

Their work extends beyond any single area of need. Across Mississippi, these organizations provide support through education, food access, clothing assistance, housing stability, literacy, school readiness, mentoring, employment coaching, and other essential resources that help families navigate daily challenges and build stability over time.

The **George County MS MILC League** (Making an Impact in the Lactation Community) provides consistent, evidence-based breastfeeding support that directly impacts the health and well-being of mothers and babies in George County. Each week, families gather in a supportive, judgment-free space to receive practical guidance, reassurance, and connection during all stages of feeding, from pregnancy through weaning. "If it weren't for the weekly MILC League meetings, my baby would have been labeled failure to thrive. Because of these groups, I was able to get consistent lactation support and have my baby weighed each week to be sure he was gaining appropriately."

George County MILC League

Legacy Education and Community Empowerment Foundation, Inc.

First Bridge

The **Delta Dads** Program provides in-home support and group education for fathers, while also engaging young men through structured programming that focuses on mental and physical health, personal development, and leadership. Through partnerships with institutions such as Holmes Community College, participants take part in regular sessions that create space for open conversation, peer engagement, and skill-building. These sessions address topics such as stress management, self-control, and navigating expectations, while encouraging participants to actively share their perspectives and support one another.

Faith-based organizations such as **House of Grace, Blessings for All Empowered by Faith, In the Shadow of the Cross, House of Peace,** and **First Bridge** often step in when families are navigating unmet needs or unexpected challenges. Through direct assistance, resource connection, and consistent presence in their communities, these organizations help families maintain stability during difficult times.

First Bridge supports children and families through programs such as the Weekend Food Backpack Program, helping address food insecurity in local communities. **In the Shadow of the Cross** provides high school students with clothing, snacks, and personal hygiene items, helping remove barriers that can contribute to absenteeism and disengagement. Across communities, this work reflects a broader commitment to meeting families where they are, strengthening support systems, and creating conditions that allow children to grow and thrive.

REACH FACTOR:
NUTRITION ASSISTANCE AND HEALTHY LIVING

Proper nutrition has far-reaching effects on the health, education, and economy of a population. To fully participate in school and the workforce, children and their families need enough nutrient-dense food to maintain energy, focus, and healthy immune systems. Food insecurity compromises students' learning and parents' workplace productivity by diminishing energy and focus as well as increasing rates of chronic illness and missed school or workdays.[62,63] In young children, the risk of developmental delays is also increased.[64]

Many children who experience consistent food insecurity will also experience toxic stress.[1] As explained throughout this report, toxic stress is not a singular adverse event in a child's youth but an episode with cascading negative effects that follow a child throughout their life, such as difficulty regulating emotions, concentrating, and planning. This can affect a child's future ability to manage the stressors of life and maintain careers and relationships.

According to a state-level 2026 study, Mississippians spend the largest percentage of their income on groceries.[65] This is largely due to the low median household income, though national grocery prices have increased over the past few years: more than 23% from 2020 to 2024.[66] On average, a Mississippi family of four can expect to pay more than $1,340 per month on groceries.[67] Assistance is available to families in the form of SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) and community resources like food pantries. However, the average monthly SNAP benefit for families with children is only $548, more than $800 short of the average monthly grocery cost.

With a statewide SNAP participation average of 13%, Mississippi closely reflects the national average of 12%. However, in Mississippi, a larger proportion of SNAP recipients are children and their families (67% vs 62% nationally). In total, Mississippi has 168 food banks and pantries geographically dispersed across 55 of 82 counties.

There is no statistical correlation between SNAP receipt and food pantry location, and many counties with high SNAP enrollment have no food pantry. For example, Holmes and Noxubee Counties each have a SNAP enrollment of 16%, but no food pantries. Comparatively, Hinds County, which has a SNAP enrollment rate of 8% has 36 food pantries. While Hinds County has a significantly larger population than Holmes and Noxubee, this difference does not compare to the demonstrable need. We calculated the number of persons on SNAP per food pantry available by county. Jackson County had the highest ratio; despite having only 4% of people on SNAP, Jackson County's large population leaves 5,880 persons on SNAP depending on a single food pantry. Copiah, Bolivar, Coahoma, Clay, Wayne, and Pike Counties each had between 3,500 and 4,000 SNAP recipients per pantry. In each of these counties, only one food pantry is available. Leake County had the lowest ratio, with 72 SNAP recipients per food pantry. While Leake County has a large population, only 1% receives SNAP benefits and 3 food pantries are available to the community.

Access to consistent, healthy food remains a critical factor in supporting children's development and family stability. In communities across Mississippi, organizations are working to address these gaps by expanding access to food, strengthening local food systems, and ensuring families have the resources they need to meet basic nutritional needs.

More Than a Meal, Full Tummy Project, and **Winston County Self Help Cooperative** work to strengthen families by addressing food insecurity and supporting healthier communities. Their efforts range from packing and distributing weekend food bags for children to helping small farmers build more sustainable local food systems. Through this work, more Mississippians have access to nourishment, stability, and the resources needed to thrive.

More Than a Meal

Full Tummy Project

Winston County Self Help Cooperative

REACH FACTOR:
SCHOOL NURSES PLAY A VITAL ROLE IN STUDENT AND COMMUNITY HEALTH

School nurses play a vital role in protecting the health of students with acute, chronic, and emergent conditions. They also promote healthy habits and coordinate school health programs that benefit all students, including mental, social, nutritional, and physical health programming.[68] When children and their peers are well, they miss fewer days of school and focus better while in attendance.[69]

Historically, for the general student population, the National Association of School Nurses (NASN) has recommended a ratio of one nurse to 750 students.[70] In 2019, Mississippi failed to meet this benchmark, with a ratio of one school nurse per 1,000 students statewide. Since at least 2025, NASN has discontinued the use of ratio to determine staffing in favor of a workload approach that considers sociocultural, economic, and environmental influences on health; these may indicate the need for more than one nurse per building to adequately meet student needs.[71]

Since 2024, Mississippi has significantly increased the number of school nurses: from 450 in 2019 to 639 in 2025. With a student population of 431,931 in the 2024-2025 academic year,[72] the ratio was brought down to one nurse per 676 students. This ratio is well within the NASN guidelines for the general population, however, Mississippi law stipulates no ratio.

Though Mississippi has a sound statewide ratio of nurses to students, a county-by-county picture shows a large degree of variation, with 44 counties meeting or exceeding NASN standards and 32 falling below. Five counties have no school nurse: Issaquena/Sharkey (combined school district), Jefferson, Jefferson Davis, Noxubee, and Winston.

REACH FACTOR:
INCLUSIVE OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Organizations such as **Golden Triangle Autism Center, Embrace Abilities, Regional Rehab Center Dyslexia Therapy Department, The Refuge of MS, Inc., Together Enhancing Autism Awareness in Mississippi (TEAAM),** and **The Rowdy Foundation** play an important role in supporting children with diverse learning and developmental needs across Mississippi.

Through therapy, inclusive programming, education, and family support, these organizations create opportunities for children with autism, dyslexia, developmental differences, and other special needs to build skills, strengthen confidence, and engage more fully in their communities.

Golden Triangle Autism Center, for example, uses Applied Behavior Analysis therapy to support the development of communication, social interaction, and daily living skills.

This work expands access to resources and services that are essential for children with varying abilities, while also supporting families as they navigate educational and developmental needs. By creating environments where children are supported in ways that reflect their individual strengths and challenges, these efforts contribute to more inclusive communities where all children have the opportunity to grow and thrive.

Embrace Abilities

REACH FACTOR:

EXPANDING PATHWAYS TO COLLEGE, CAREER, AND LONG-TERM SUCCESS

Adolescents need consistent support to stay engaged in school, prepare for life after graduation, and move toward greater stability and opportunity**. Alcorn State University's Upward Bound, Gateway Community Development Corporation YouthBuild, TRiO 61 South, Bee the Change, and the Vicksburg Warren Youth Development Center** are helping young people across Mississippi build stronger futures.

These programs provide a range of support, including tutoring, mentoring, life skills development, workforce preparation, and college access. In addition to academic support, they create space for students to set goals, build confidence, and develop the skills needed to navigate the transition into adulthood. Programs like **Upward Bound** at Alcorn State University connect students to college readiness resources, academic support, and exposure to higher education opportunities, helping expand what students see as possible for their futures.

YouthBuild provides young people with job training, leadership development, and hands-on experience while also supporting educational progress in Yazoo County. By encouraging school persistence, assisting with scholarship applications, and preparing students for college and career pathways, these programs are helping equip the next generation of Mississippi's workforce with the skills and confidence needed for long-term success.

The Vicksburg Warren Youth Development Center (YDC) brings together schools, families, community agencies, and local leaders under a coordinated, data-informed framework focused on preventing youth violence and improving student outcomes. By connecting students with the support systems around them, the YDC works to keep young people engaged in school and positioned for success.

Strategic Solutions for Families, Inc. (SSFF), via the Prentiss County Drug-Free Community Coalition initiaive, focuses on prevention and early intervention by promoting healthy, drug-free lifestyles among youth and families. Through partnerships with schools, law enforcement, healthcare providers, and community organizations, the coalition works to reduce risk factors while strengthening the protective factors that support positive decision-making and long-term well-being. Across communities, these efforts are helping young people build direction, confidence, and the skills needed to pursue meaningful opportunities beyond high school and become the next generation of Mississippi's leaders.

Gateway Community Development Corporation YouthBuild

TRiO 61 South

REACH FACTOR:
REBUILDING TRUST AND CONNECTION FOR CHILDREN

Abuse and neglect can have pervasive and enduring effects on a child. Biological effects of toxic stress on the brain–including an increase in the size of the amygdala and/or a decrease in the size of the hippocampus–can prime children to react to negative or even neutral situations in reactive or unproductive ways.[1] These children can struggle to build trust and maintain relationships with others, including peers, adoptive families, and mentors who have their best interests at heart. As this report shows, these children are at greater risk for negative outcomes such as interactions with the juvenile justice system.[43]

TBRI, or Trust Based Relational Intervention, is a body of evidence-based practices created to meet the needs of children who have experienced abuse and may, consequently, have difficulty trusting caring adults in their lives.[73] TBRI equips foster parents, teachers, social workers, religious leaders, and even biological parents to compassionately connect with young people who express big emotions or act out in unanticipated ways. Adults can use TBRI to better understand children's needs and help guide children towards less reactive behaviors. The Mississippi Department of Child Protection Services recently made this program required for therapeutic group home services.

Recent academic research indicates that TBRI has lasting and meaningful effects on children. One year after implementation, more than half of participating children improved their attachment, behavior, and/or feeling of security. Statistically significant decreases in anxiety & depression, social problems, and aggressive behavior were also observed.[74]

Over the past few years, Mississippi has developed a robust statewide network of TBRI-trained professionals, led by academics at Mississippi State University (MSU) and the Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) system. This collaborative, multi-disciplinary team includes mental health professionals, youth court judges, social workers, and an array of trusted community resource centers. More than 200 TBRI Practitioners are now certified within the state, offering widespread coverage. MDCPS now requires group home workers to receive TBRI training and is in the process of training all social workers at the agency.[75] In 2025, the network trained nearly 1,000 professionals and caregivers across the state, ensuring that children are provided trauma-informed care.[76]

REACH FACTOR:
STRENGTHENED SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

The **Southwest Mississippi Children's Advocacy Center, CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) of South Mississippi,** and **The Refuge at West Heights Baptist Church (WHBC)** play an important role in supporting children and families navigating the foster care system and other vulnerable circumstances across Mississippi. Through advocacy, trauma-informed care, and direct support services, they provide guidance and stability for children and caregivers facing complex challenges.

Their work helps ensure that children have consistent support systems in place, including trusted adults who advocate for their safety, well-being, and long-term outcomes.

By connecting families to resources and supporting caregivers, these efforts help create a stronger foundation for stability and healing, while reinforcing the support systems children need to grow and thrive.

REACH FACTOR:
EARLY CHILD CARE ACCESSIBILITY

Early child care access has serious implications for every domain of this report: the economy, education, health, and family and community. Child care ensures parents are able to participate the workforce. More than 75% of Mississippi business leaders report lack of child care "sometimes" or "always" being a barrier to employee success.[59] In 2024, nearly one tenth of Mississippi parents of children five and under reported someone in the family having to quit their job, not take a job, or greatly change their job because of child care issues.[60] Employment improves stability for families and communities and positively affects the children of working parents; when parents are consistently employed, their children are more optimistic about their own career prospects.[2]

While keeping parents engaged in the workforce, early child care provides children with a solid educational foundation during the years when their brains are most malleable and ready to learn.[28] Additionally, children in early child care are more likely to receive timely developmental screenings and receive intervention before the age of 5, when it can have the biggest impact.[59] As this report shows, when primed to excel academically and socially through early learning opportunities, children are less likely to interact with the juvenile justice system, more likely to graduate high school, and more likely to become productive citizens in their communities. Child care is a tide that can lift the boats of parents and children alike.

Mississippi has introduced two opportunities for communities to offer free pre-k: Early Learning Collaboratives and the State Invested Pre-K Program. Both programs are regulated by the Mississippi Department of Education, but are community-established and led.

Early Learning Collaboratives (ELCs), established by the Mississippi Legislature in 2013, require collaboration between community stakeholders including child care centers, school districts, and Head Start agencies. In the 2024-2025 school year, ELCs served 6,833 children across 37 counties. The **Jefferson County Early Learning Collaborative and the Tallahatchie Early Learning Alliance** provide high-quality pre-kindergarten to four-year-old children through their ELC to strengthen early learning and set the stage for lifelong success, ultimately to ensure they enter kindergarten prepared academically, socially, and emotionally.

The State Invested Pre-K Program (SIP) was established in 2023. This program does not require collaboration with Head Start, removing a barrier that prohibited many communities from applying. Head Start centers are not present in 14 counties. By the 2024-2025 school year, SIP enrolled 1,889 students across 24 counties. In total, these programs reached 8,021 children across 50 of Mississippi's 82 counties.

REACH FACTOR:
EARLY LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Communities across Mississippi are investing in early learning by expanding access to resources, support, and educational opportunities for young children and their families. Initiatives such as the **Christian Learning Center** provide a structured, faith-centered academic environment that supports early childhood development for families in Madison County.

Additional support is provided through the **Mississippi LIFT Child Care and Resource & Referral (R&R) Centers at MSU Extension in Oktibbeha and Simpson Counties, as well as R&R sites in Senatobia and Wiggins**. These centers help connect families and early childhood providers to developmentally appropriate educational resources, referral services, and family engagement opportunities.

Funded by the Mississippi Department of Human Services, each R&R site operates a lending library with a wide range of learning materials and toys available at no cost for early childhood professionals, children, and families. These sites also host monthly community events that provide engaging, educational experiences, along with makerspaces where educators and families can create learning materials using tools such as die-cuts, bulletin board paper, and laminating equipment.

By expanding access to high-quality resources and removing cost barriers, these efforts support stronger early learning environments, encourage family engagement, and help ensure children enter school prepared to succeed.

REACH FACTOR:
STRENGTHENING EARLY LEARNING AND ACADEMIC SUPPORT

Having a strong start is critical to long-term academic success, and communities across Mississippi are investing in both students and the adults who support them to strengthen learning outcomes from an early age.

Lamar County Schools Parents as Teachers supports and empowers parents as their child's first and most important teacher by promoting healthy development, early literacy, school readiness, and strong social-emotional skills through home visits and hands-on engagement. The program also serves pregnant and parenting teens, connecting them to resources such as child care assistance and WIC, helping prevent dropout and encouraging young parents to remain engaged in both their education and their child's development.

Catholic Charities of Vardaman offers academic support through an after-school tutoring program designed for students in kindergarten through third grade. Focused on building foundational reading skills and addressing early learning gaps, the program provides targeted support during a critical stage of academic development.

One student, a quiet second grader who began the program struggling to read aloud, gradually built confidence through one-on-one support and consistent encouragement. By the end of the school year, she was reading at grade level and volunteering to read in class. Reflecting on her progress, she shared, "I didn't know I was smart."

Programs like this demonstrate how early learning and additional academic support can strengthen literacy skills while also building confidence and reinforcing a child's belief in their ability to succeed.

The Meridian Public School District Foundation for Educational Excellence funds grants for teachers across the district, creating opportunities to strengthen classroom instruction, increase student engagement, and support academic growth. The Foundation also supports the Trailblazers of Excellence Award, which recognizes student achievement and helps foster a culture of excellence across the district.

Golden Pages-Laurel's Literacy Leap, a Mississippi Campaign for Grade-Level Reading community, prioritizes kindergarten readiness and third-grade reading proficiency by providing books, family resources, and literacy support. Through partnerships with local libraries and schools, the initiative expands access to reading materials and creates opportunities for students to engage with literacy in meaningful ways, including visits from high school student leaders who encourage younger children to build strong reading habits.

The **Multi County Community Service Agency, Inc. Lauderdale County Foster Grandparent Program** supports students by placing adults aged 55 and older in classrooms, after-school programs, and early learning centers to provide tutoring, mentorship, and consistent encouragement. These volunteers play an important role in supporting academic progress while also building relationships that help students feel seen, supported, and motivated to succeed.

Lauderdale County Foster Grandparent Program

REACH FACTOR:
OUT-OF-SCHOOL ENRICHMENT BUILDS WELL-BEING

In Mississippi, learning and development extend far beyond the school day. Outside of the classroom, children benefit from additional opportunities to build skills, strengthen relationships, and explore new interests in supportive environments. Organizations that provide safe, reliable out-of-school programming play an important role in supporting both children and families.

The Boys & Girls Club of Ripley offers tutoring support alongside engaging after-school activities designed to build confidence, skills, and positive relationships. One example is the Girls Step Team, which provides opportunities for participants to develop teamwork, stage presence, and self-expression while strengthening leadership and communication skills in a supportive environment.

In Hinds County, **Operation Shoestring** provides year-round academic, social, and emotional support to children in pre-K through 7th grade through its Project Rise afterschool and summer program, while also connecting families to additional resources. Ariyanna, a 4th grader, says, "Operation Shoestring is like my home! I just love it here, and everyone is so nice. I love all the employees, the teachers, janitors—everybody."

The Lad Project in Pass Christian mentors and tutors students in grades 1st through 5th while also broadening their experiences through outings and enrichment opportunities offered at no cost to families. **CURRage 2 Change** provides homework assistance, mental health support, life skills development, and recreational programming for children in Leflore County. **G.O.A.T. (God Over All Things) Camps,** held twice a year in Copiah and Lincoln counties, offer free outdoor experiences that combine sports, arts, guest speakers, and mentorship, with adolescents serving as leaders and role models.

Family Biz Builder provides tutoring and mentorship opportunities that help children and teens strengthen academic skills while building confidence and accountability. **The Mississippi Delta Nature and Learning Center** blends science, literacy, environmental stewardship, and creative play to help children build confidence, develop practical skills, strengthen academic learning, improve physical health, and form a lasting connection to their environment and community.

These programs reinforce academic growth and offer structure, mentorship, and enrichment that contribute to a child's overall development while providing caregivers with consistency and peace of mind.

REACH FACTOR:
SUPPORTING LITERACY AND BEYOND THROUGH PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Increasing access to books and resources plays an important role in strengthening children's literacy and long-term learning outcomes. For many children and families, libraries serve as a critical access point to books, technology, educational programs, and a safe, welcoming environment outside of school.

Libraries such as the **Choctaw County Library, Sharkey-Issaquena County Library, East Mississippi Regional Library-Bay Springs, Carthage-Leake County Library, Richton Public Library, and Waynesboro-Wayne County Library** are trusted community spaces that extend far beyond traditional library services. They support lifelong learning through digital access, story time, literacy programming, and family-centered activities that help communities stay connected and engaged.

The **Waynesboro-Wayne County Library**, for example, offers a range of programs including craft clubs, summer reading activities, and its Seed Library, which provides free heirloom seeds to encourage gardening and food education. It was also the first library in Mississippi to receive the Library of Congress State Literacy Award for the "Laundry & Literacy Project." Every two weeks, library staff deliver free books to Little Free Libraries located in city parks, the local hospital, and laundromats throughout the community, expanding access to reading materials in places families already gather.

REACH FACTOR:

SUPPORTING WHOLE-CHILD DEVELOPMENT THROUGH ACCESS TO THE ARTS

Art integration plays an important role in supporting children's development by fostering creativity, critical thinking, and self-expression. Programs like Creative Starts bring artists into early learning settings to deliver art-integrated lessons that support kindergarten readiness and early skill development for young children.

The **Quitman County Art Council** provides integrated art education by partnering with local English Language Arts teachers to connect arts and academics. During the summer of 2025, students attending the Quitman County Arts Council & Culture Center Summer Art Camp participated in a literacy-focused project that began with weekly visits to the local library and culminated in the creation of a published book. As students explored stories about leaders, artists, and heroes from the Mississippi Delta, they were inspired to research and write about influential figures from their own communities. With guidance from teachers, students took on roles as researchers, writers, illustrators, and editors, strengthening their reading, writing, and collaboration skills throughout the process. By the end of the summer, their work was compiled into a published book celebrating Delta heroes.

Delta Arts Alliance expands access to arts education across Bolivar County by offering free instruction in visual, performing, and literary arts through schools, community partnerships, and programs hosted at its campus. In addition to classes and workshops, the organization serves as a creative hub for the community, providing gallery space, public exhibits, and collaborative opportunities with local partners. Through initiatives like its partnership with Cleveland elementary schools and community organizations for the annual Empty Bowls fundraiser, students are introduced to the cultural history of pottery in Mississippi while actively contributing to efforts that support local food pantries. Experiences like these connect creativity with community impact, helping children build both artistic skills and a deeper sense of purpose.

Griot Arts Inc. runs a free afterschool arts program for children and teens ages 3 to 18 in Coahoma County, offering more than 35 weekly classes in dance, visual arts, theater, music, cooking, coding, and fashion design. With a firm commitment to accessibility, the program ensures that a family's financial circumstances do not prevent children from participating.

Griot Arts Inc.

2026 COUNTY REACH AWARDEES

Adams	Adams County CASA
Alcorn	The Lighthouse Foundation
Amite	Southwest Mississippi Child Advocacy Center
Attala	Legacy Education and Community Empowerment Foundation, Inc.
Benton	House of Grace
Bolivar	Delta Arts Alliance
Calhoun	Catholic Charities of Vardaman
Carroll	Carroll County Public Library
Chickasaw	Excel Inc.
Choctaw	Choctaw County Library
Claiborne	Upward Bound
Clarke	Clarke County Baptist Center
Clay	Golden Triangle Autism Center
Coahoma	Griot Arts Inc.
Copiah	G.O.A.T. Camps
Covington	Junior League of Covington County
DeSoto	DeSoto County Dream Center
Forrest	First Bridge
Franklin	Franklin County Chess
George	George County MS MILC League
Greene	In the Shadow of the Cross
Grenada	100 Black Men of Grenada
Hancock	CASA of South Mississippi
Harrison	The LAD Project
Hinds	Operation Shoestring
Holmes	Delta Dads
Humphreys	Humphreys County Library System
Issaquena	Sharkey-Issaquena County Library
Itawamba	Regional Rehab Center Dyslexia Therapy Department
Jackson	Embrace Abilities
Jasper	East Mississippi Regional Library-Bay Springs
Jefferson	Jefferson County Early Learning Collaborative
JeffersonDavis	Jefferson Davis County Community Impact Coalition
Jones	Golden Pages-Laurel's Literacy Leap (Campaign for Grade-Level Reading)
Kemper	Foster Grandparents
Lafayette	More than a Meal
Lamar	Lamar County School District-Parents as Teachers Program
Lauderdale	Meridian Public School District Foundation for Educational Excellence
Lawrence	Soulfed Ministries
Leake	Carthage-Leake County Library
Lee	Creative Starts

2026 COUNTY REACH AWARDEES

Leflore	CURRage 2 Change
Lincoln	Girl Scout Troop 4775
Lowndes	The Rowdy Foundation
Madison	The Christian Learning Center
Marion	Marion County Advisory Council
Marshall	House of Grace
Monroe	Full Tummy Project
Montgomery	Blessings for All Empowered By Faith
Neshoba	The Refuge of MS, Inc.
Newton	Junior Auxiliary of Newton County
Noxubee	Rotary Club of Macon
Oktibbeha	Mississippi LIFT Resource & Referral at MSU Extension - Oktibbeha County
Panola	Mississippi Coats 4 Kidz
Pearl River	Kids of Pearl River County
Perry	Richton Public Library
Pike	Pike County Sleep In Heavenly Peace
Pontotoc	West Heights Baptist Church The Refuge Foster Support
Prentiss	Strategic Programs for Families
Quitman	Quitman County Arts Council
Rankin	Ever Reaching Community Outreach
Scott	Legacy Education and Community Empowerment Foundation, Inc.
Sharkey	The House Of Peace Worship Church International
Simpson	Mississippi Lift Resource & Referral at MSU Extension - Simpson County
Smith	TEAAM (Together Enhancing Autism Awareness in Mississippi)
Stone	Mississippi Lift Resource & Referral - Wiggins, MS
Sunflower	Deer Creek Promise Community After School Program
Tallahatchie	Tallahatchie Early Learning Alliance (TELA)
Tate	Senatobia Resource and Referral Center
Tippah	Boys & Girls Club of Ripley
Tishomingo	Boys & Girls Club of Iuka
Tunica	Family Biz Builder
Union	Bee the Change
Walthall	Hope Community Collective
Warren	Vicksburg Warren Youth Development Center
Washington	Delta Nature and Learning Center
Wayne	Waynesboro-Wayne County Library
Webster	Eupora Rotary Club
Wilkinson	TRiO Talent Search 61 South
Winston	Winston County Self Help Cooperative
Yalobusha	Junior Auxiliary of Water Valley
Yazoo	Gateway Community Development Corporation YouthBuild

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