

# THE ROLE OF HOUSING IN HEALTH

## A DATA REVIEW FROM THE 2020 PENNSYLVANIA FAMILY SUPPORT NEEDS ASSESSMENT

### PENNSYLVANIA FAMILY SUPPORT NEEDS ASSESSMENT

From 2019-2020, the Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) partnered with Children's Hospital of Philadelphia's (CHOP) PolicyLab to conduct a county-level needs assessment of health resources and economic and social conditions for Pennsylvania families. The final product, the [PA Family Support Needs Assessment](#) (FSNA), provides critical insight into both social determinants of health—like rent burden and food access—and traditional measures of health outcomes across Pennsylvania.\* In the assessment, counties are ranked as having elevated, moderate or low need across 67 indicators.\*\* The PA FSNA provides a systematic method for identifying community need to inform resource allocation statewide.

Economic hardships, such as unemployment and rental cost burdens, were among the most pronounced issues facing both urban and rural counties in the state. We issued the FSNA prior to the arrival of COVID-19; the pandemic will continue to exacerbate economic challenges—including housing security, rental costs, transportation barriers, food insecurity and unemployment—for many Pennsylvania families.

### THE HOUSING, NEIGHBORHOOD & HEALTH CONNECTION

*Housing quality, availability, affordability and location play a significant role in a family's health.* Research shows that housing insecurity is linked to negative impacts on physical and mental health for youth and adults. Foreclosures and evictions financially damage families and communities and make it more difficult for families to secure housing in the future. When families experience high housing costs, as a percentage of overall household income, they are less likely to be able to afford health care and food.

Housing quality also plays a role in child health. Lead, often present in older houses, has negative health effects on pregnant women and unborn children, and short- and long-term cognitive effects in exposed children. In Pennsylvania, non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic children experience lead poisoning at higher rates than non-Hispanic White children.

*A family's community environment is where they live, work and play. Community has a strong influence on family well-being. The economic and social contexts in neighborhoods affect child health and well-being throughout the course of their lives. Pennsylvania is a diverse state, requiring special attention to the unique needs of rural and urban areas and how each county can prioritize healthy communities for its residents—beginning with ensuring an environment that supports and improves health.*

\*Information from this brief is compiled from the full PA Family Support Needs Assessment developed by PolicyLab at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and the Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning. The full report and appendices are available at [bitly.com/PA-FSNA-2020](https://bitly.com/PA-FSNA-2020)

\*\*Refer to the "Summary of Methods" chapter, starting on page 8, in the full PA Family Support Needs Assessment

***Neighborhoods too, not just houses, impact child well-being.*** Measures like grocery store and transportation access indicate barriers to health in communities. Residential segregation and neighborhood disinvestment resulting from systemic racism harms the health and well-being of Black, Indigenous and other people of color. Considered a fundamental cause of health inequities, residential segregation and neighborhood disinvestment are linked to poor health outcomes, including infectious and chronic diseases. The inaccessibility of safe, affordable, quality housing, exacerbated by the pandemic, has long-range negative effects on communities of color.

## HOUSING ASSESSMENT

As part of the FSNA, PolicyLab assessed county-level data across seven key housing, economic, and community indicators, shown below, which influence health outcomes in childhood and throughout a person's life. These ***identify areas of possible intervention to support economic and housing stability and child and family health*** in Pennsylvania's most housing-vulnerable communities.

INDICATOR	DEFINITION & SOURCE
Rental cost burden	Percent of renters whose rent is 30% or greater of their total income, 2013-2017, U.S. Census
Low income and low access to food	Percent of census tracts with low income and low access to grocery stores, 2015, U.S. Department of Agriculture
Child food insecurity	Percent of children living in households that experienced food insecurity at some point in 2017, Feeding America
Elevated blood lead level	Percent of tested children with confirmed blood lead level of $\geq 5$ $\mu\text{g/dL}$ , 2018, Pennsylvania Department of Health
Residential segregation	Index of dissimilarity where higher values indicate greater residential segregation between Black and White county residents, 2014-2018, U.S. Census
Transit access	Public transit performance score in 6 urban counties (Delaware, Chester, Montgomery, Bucks, Philadelphia and Allegheny) or percent of census tracts with low car ownership in 61 rural counties
Unemployment	Unemployed as a percent of the civilian labor force, 2019, Bureau of Labor Statistics

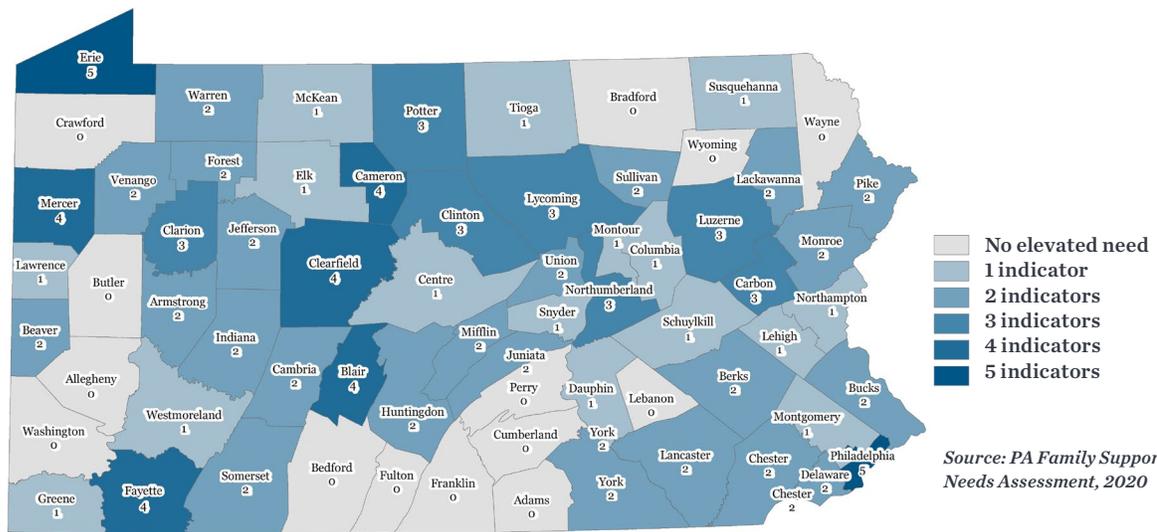
## WHAT WE FOUND

In comparison to national benchmarks, ***Pennsylvania has a smaller proportion of census tracts with low income and low access to food; the state has higher levels of cost-burdened renters, children who are experiencing food insecurity, children with elevated blood lead levels and unemployment.***\*\*\* When mapping counties with elevated need across the housing-related indicators, seven counties experience a concentration of need in four or more indicators (see the map on page 3). Erie and Philadelphia Counties have the highest concentration of need, with elevated need in five out of seven indicators. Conversely, 53 counties (representing 80% of all Pennsylvania counties) had two or fewer elevated indicators across these seven areas.

Altogether, areas of elevated need were geographically dispersed throughout the state, with no clear concentration in urban or rural areas. However, certain individual indicators showed some evidence of clustering, with the percentage of people cost burdened by rent being a particularly concerning need in the eastern part of the state (see Appendix Figure 1). Both elevated blood lead levels in children and unemployment appear to concentrate in a few counties in the northeast (see Appendix Figure 4). The individual maps in our appendix offer a county-by-county look at elevated need and opportunity for targeted support, such as addressing residential segregation and neighborhood disinvestment (see Appendix Figure 5).

\*\*\*Two of the seven indicators presented here do not have an equivalent national benchmark: residential segregation and access to transit.

## Summary of Counties with Elevated Need Across Seven Housing-Related Measures



## RECOMMENDATIONS

Our findings contribute meaningful insight into policy opportunities to improve housing and health in all regions of the state. We recommend the following areas of policy focus:

→ **Addressing lead exposure:** There is an opportunity to reduce childhood exposure to lead across Pennsylvania. Early childhood exposure to lead can have detrimental and lifelong effects on health. Efforts to identify and mitigate avenues of lead exposure could have widespread and long-lasting benefits, particularly for families in northeastern Pennsylvania.

→ **Monitor changes due to COVID-19:** Data presented here were collected before the COVID-19 pandemic, which has acutely affected housing and economic indicators in the state. These indicators will have serious long-range health effects for families. Communities need focused housing and food policy support to insulate families from these effects in the future.

→ **Prioritize housing support for families:** Families with young children are vulnerable to lasting health impacts stemming from housing instability, poor housing quality and eviction. Focused housing assistance for families with young children can help mitigate these harms, especially during the ongoing pandemic. Pennsylvania families would benefit from immediate and efficient distribution of federal emergency rental and mortgage relief funds from the American Recovery Act and a state-sponsored extension on eviction and foreclosure bans. In addition, families with children may benefit from increased education around affordable housing and housing rights, which has recently been highlighted in training for family support programs through the PA Office of Child Development and Early Learning. A focus on racial equity in these efforts is warranted.

→ **Strengthening the safety net:** Across the state, communities experience economic and housing insecurity, food insecurity, high rental burdens and elevated unemployment. Targeted supports to the social safety net in counties with elevated need can help stabilize families with young children and promote healthier communities.



## REFERENCES

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The mission of PolicyLab at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) is to achieve optimal child health and well-being by informing program and policy changes through interdisciplinary research.

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FIGURE 1: COUNTIES WITH PERCENTAGE OF RENTERS WHO ARE COST BURDENED BY RENT

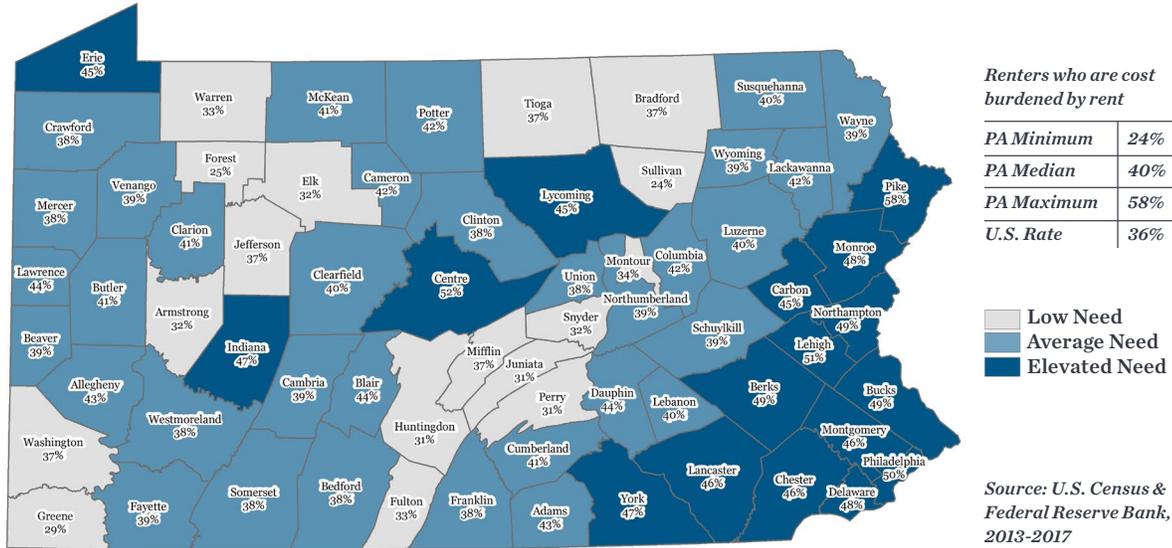


FIGURE 2: COUNTIES WITH PERCENTAGE OF CENSUS TRACTS WITH BOTH LOW INCOME AND LOW ACCESS TO FOOD RETAIL

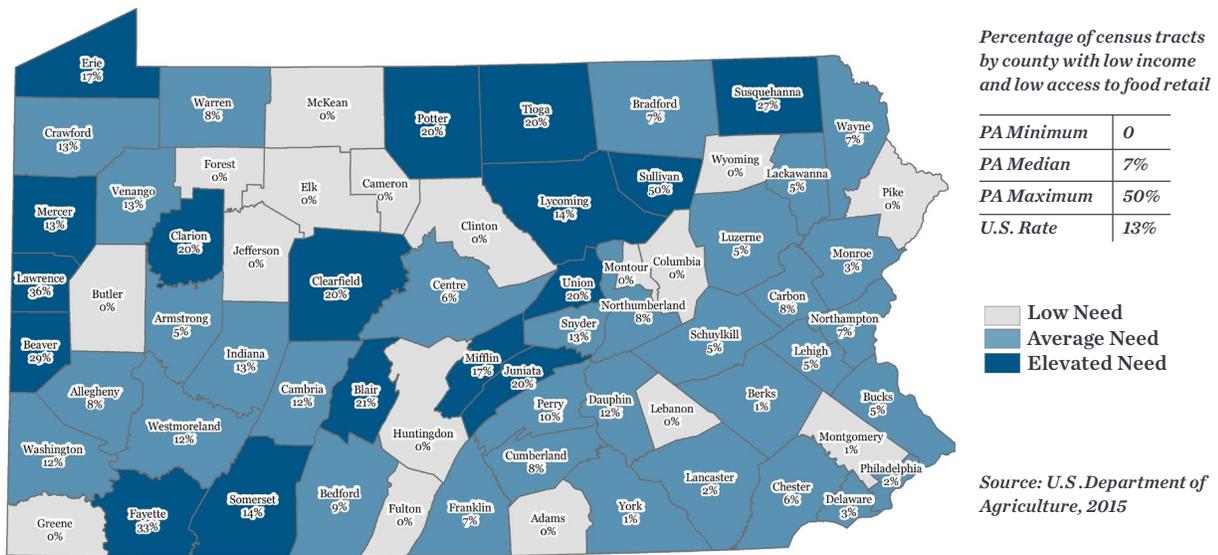


FIGURE 3: COUNTIES WITH PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN WHO ARE FOOD INSECURE

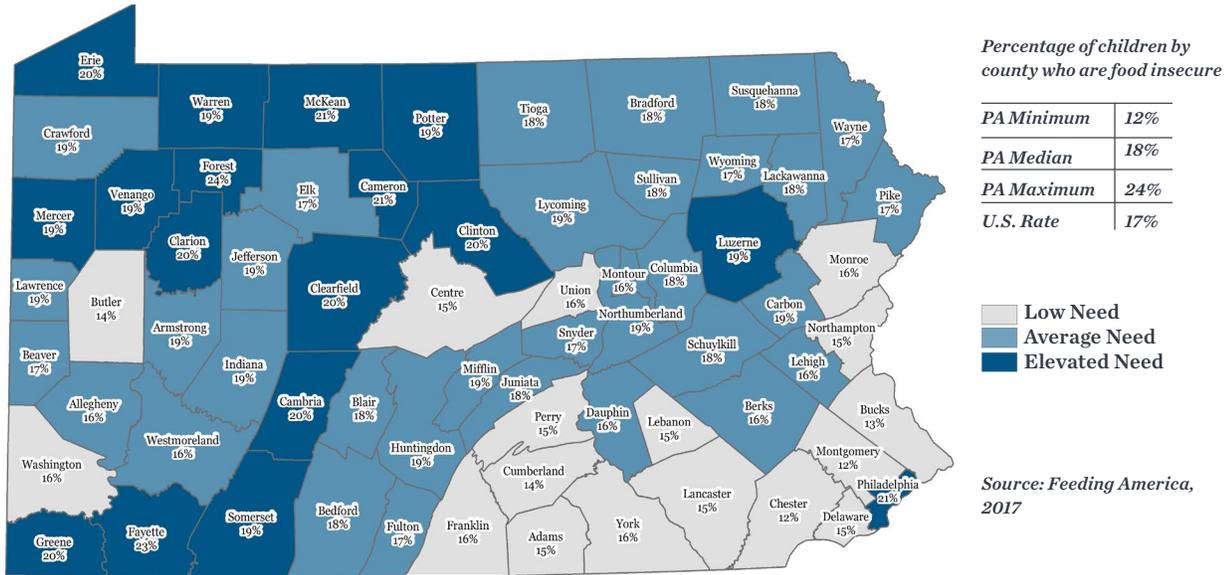


FIGURE 4: COUNTIES WITH PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN WITH ELEVATED BLOOD LEAD LEVELS

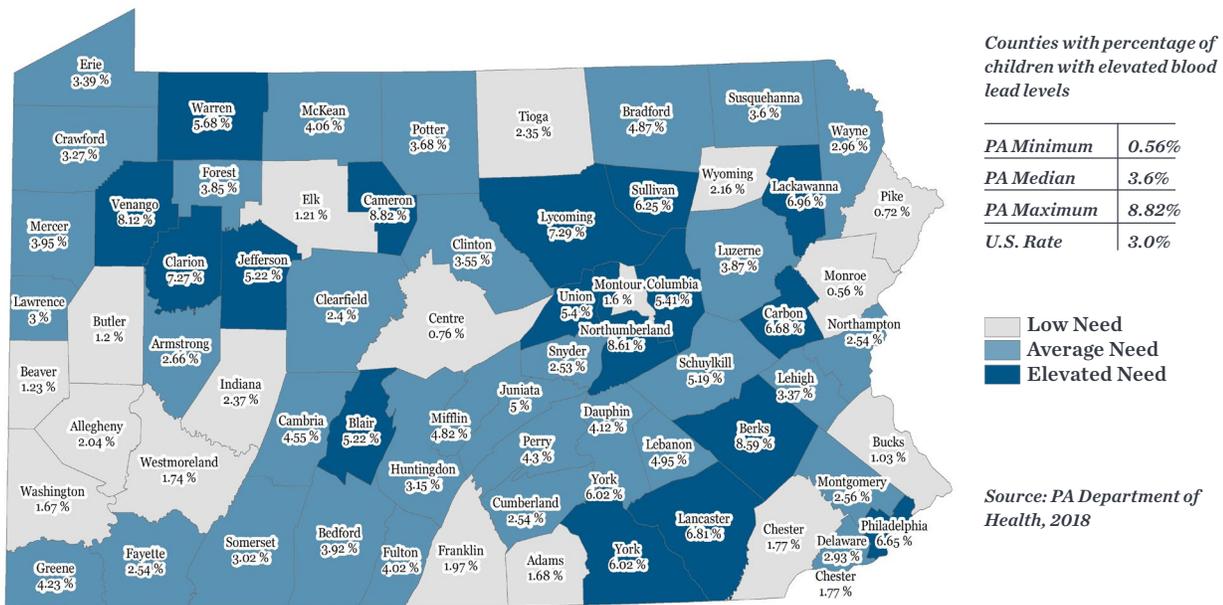


FIGURE 5: RESIDENTIAL SEGREGATION INDEX AT THE COUNTY LEVEL

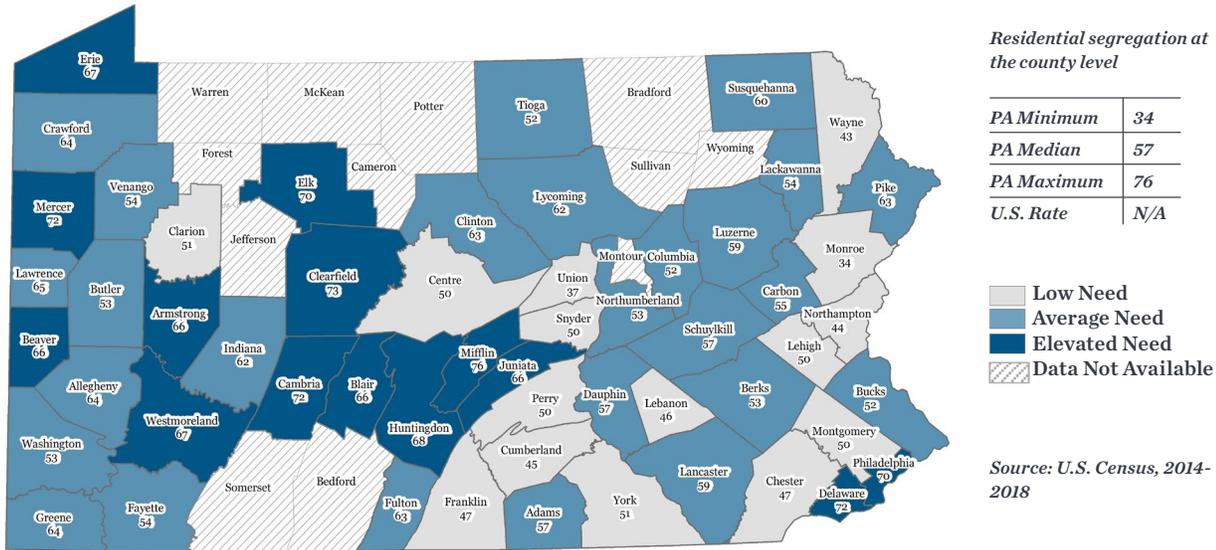


FIGURE 6: COUNTIES WITH HIGH PERCENTAGE OF FAMILIES WITH LOW ACCESS TO PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION (URBAN) OR CAR OWNERSHIP (RURAL)

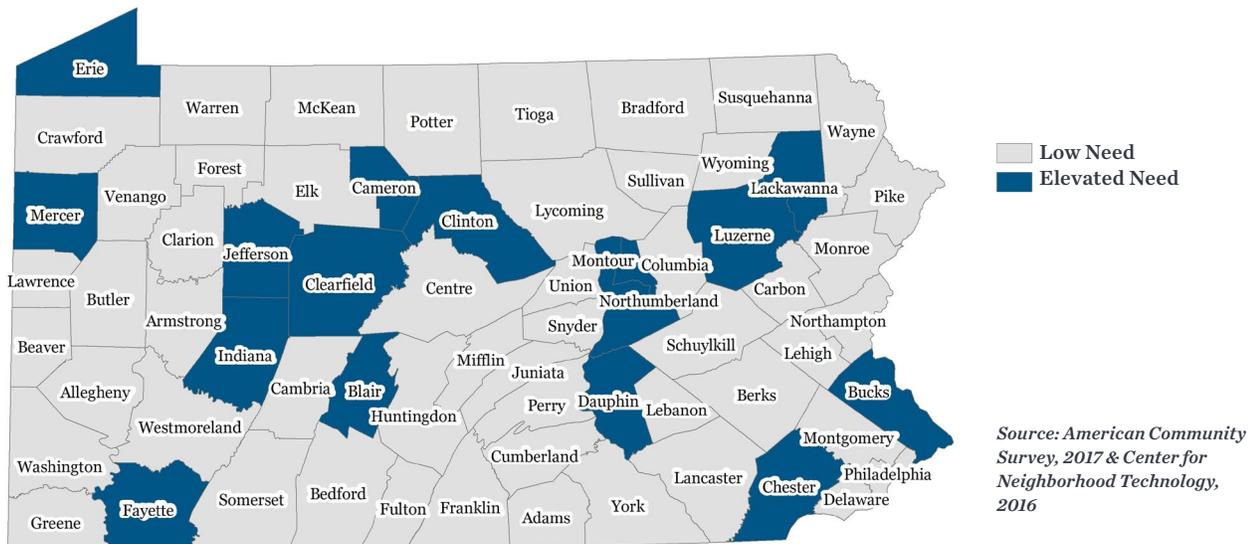


FIGURE 7: UNEMPLOYMENT RATE AT THE COUNTY LEVEL

