Greater Erie Community Action Committee

18 West Ninth Street; Erie, PA 16501

2023-2025 Erie county PA Community Assessment

*Compiled by the Greater Erie Community Action Committee*

Preface

The Greater Erie Community Action Committee is a private community action agency located in Erie County, Pennsylvania. As part of the national network of community action agencies, we trace our roots back to the signing of the Economic Opportunity Act by President Johnson in 1964. Our agency’s mission has remained focused on alleviating the causes of poverty and empowering families to build wealth so they may live a life with dignity.

Our agency’s community assessment has been generated through internal processes, including primary sources – surveys, focus groups, and informal feedback combined with secondary data from various federal, state and local data sources. Additionally, it should be noted that numerous entities within both Erie city and county have undertaken planning processes focused on specific areas over the last several years. These reports also have been reviewed and incorporated as relevant to avoid duplication of efforts in data collection. References are provided throughout the document so the reader may verify data and pull their own updated data as desired.

National organizational standards for community action agencies mandate the completion of community assessments at least every three years, but the production of this document was not simply for the purpose of checking a box. Rather the data and analysis contained within these pages will serve as the basis for planning the goals, outcomes and services provided by GECAC over the next three years.

\* This Community Assessment was approved by the GECAC Board of Directors on…

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**Civic**

# Executive Summary

The Greater Erie Community Action Committee is a private community action agency located in Erie County, Pennsylvania. As part of the national network of community action agencies, we trace our roots back to the signing of the Economic Opportunity Act by President Johnson in 1964. Our agency’s mission has remained focused on alleviating the causes of poverty and empowering families to build wealth so they may live a life with dignity.

Our agency’s community assessment has been generated through internal processes, including primary sources – surveys, focus groups, and informal feedback combined with secondary data from various federal, state and local data sources. Additionally, it should be noted that numerous entities within both Erie city and county have undertaken planning processes focused on specific areas over the last several years. These reports also have been reviewed and incorporated as relevant to avoid duplication of efforts in data collection.

The total population of Erie County as of the 2020 Decennial Census was 280,566. From 2001 to 2020 Erie County has experienced a population decline of -9,690 across all demographic categories, representing a -3.45% change.

While Erie County’s population still is primarily non-Hispanic, white (81.9%), it continues to increase in diversity. From 2010 to 2020 the Population of Color rose from 37,779 to 51,696 – a 36.8% increase. This rise was primarily fueled by increases in the populations identifying as Asian (52% increase), Other (72% increase), and Two or more races (59% increase).

The age 60-plus population increased by 14% to 67,967 individuals, accounting for 25% of the total population. The median age also increased from 38.6 to 39.7 as of 2020. It should be noted that this data was all collected prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and will therefore need to be reevaluated to determine the effect these additional deaths had. An aging population carries with it concerns including the decline in working-age population, an increase in health care costs, and all-around changes to the economy.

In 2020, Erie County ranked 41st among Pennsylvania’s 67 counties with a median income of $52,863. This is about 80% of the PA median income of $63,627. Median income is lowest for Black Erie County residents ($23,668) and highest for Erie County’s Asian residents ($58,553). Single-parent, female households have the lowest median income of all household types ($24,247).

Poverty in Erie County fell from 2012 to 2020. According to the 2020 5-year American Community Survey, 40,103 Erie County residents were living with an income below poverty. This is 15.5%, which is a .6% decrease from 2012. In 2020, 17,385 individuals in Erie County were living in extreme poverty. This is 6.7% of the total county population and 43.4% of the people living in poverty. This is down slightly from 7.1% in 2012. Poverty is linked with negative conditions such as substandard housing, inadequate nutrition and food insecurity, lack of access to health care, and unsafe neighborhoods. For those in extreme poverty, these effects are compounded.

When looking at poverty rates for families, the presence of children under the age of 18 and marital status of the householder have a significant impact on the likelihood of a family living in poverty. While families in general have a lower poverty rate than the overall poverty rate, families with children under the age of 18 have a higher rate.

Poverty is unequally distributed across different races; this is an unfortunate reality not only in Erie County, but also throughout the United States. Across the county, Asian and white residents have the lowest poverty rates at 8.7% and 12.8%, respectively. Black residents, on the other hand, have poverty rates nearly three times the county rate at 40.5%. Also, significantly higher than the county rate are those identifying as some other race (38.5%), Hispanic or Latino residents of any race (38.4%), and those from two or more races (28.7%).

Different age groups of Erie County residents are affected by poverty in varying degrees with children under the age of 5 experiencing the highest rates of poverty. More than 1 in every 4 children under the age of 5 are living in poverty in Erie County. The next largest affected group is those ages 18-24 where 21.6% are living in poverty and is followed by children ages 5-17 where 1 in every 5 are living in poverty. The group least likely to live in poverty are those age 65+ where 8.2% live in poverty. With the exception of the 60+ age groups, all age bands fare worse in Erie County than the Pennsylvania and United States rates.

Needs for the area of transportation were assessed in the areas of access to and cost of public and personal transportation. Needs in this area increased during the pandemic in all categories. Income also had an effect on this area. Individuals with incomes less than $50,000 were more likely to experience transportation needs than the respondent base as a whole.

Housing needs were assessed across the full spectrum from homelessness through homeownership. Unlike in many needs surveys in the past, eviction and homelessness were not ranked as the greatest needs. Rather affordability of utilities, home maintenance, rent and mortgage and access to contractors for home repairs topped the list of current needs. As expected, the needs for low-income individuals were greater than those for the population as a whole. One area of note was the significant jump in individuals experiencing difficulty affording utilities after the start of the pandemic as compared to before it began.

Needs in the employment category nearly doubled during the pandemic in many instances. These needs ranged from finding affordable job training to finding jobs which paid a family sustaining wage. This survey was issued after the government lock downs had ended so this continued need speaks to the lasting effects the pandemic had on employers and employees in the region.

# Methodology

## Qualitative data

In January 2021, GECAC issued a community-wide survey to gather feedback on the needs of the community. (See Appendix A for actual survey.) This survey contained both closed and open-ended questions asking about the needs of families pre-COVID, post-COVID and currently in the areas of:

* Education
* Employment
* Health care
* Housing
* Nutrition or food
* Senior citizen challenges
* Social issues (i.e. drug abuse, alcohol abuse, violence, discrimination)
* Transportation
* Youth issues

The same survey also gathered satisfaction data from any individual who identified as a current or former participant in any GECAC services and demographic data so the feedback could be analyzed on more specific levels. The survey link was distributed via direct mail, the agency newsletter, social media, and email signatures and through numerous partner agencies in the community. It remained open for all of 2021 and part of 2022; however, the majority of the responses were received between March and April of 2021 – approximately one year into the ongoing pandemic. The open-ended questions from this survey served as the basis for the majority of the qualitative data used in the report.

Qualitative data also was gathered through:

* Program specific surveys and focus groups, such as those used for the summer youth and area agency on aging programs
* Feasibility study conducted to inform the development of vacant property owned by GECAC
* Secondary sources of reports compiled by community partners, including:
	+ Erie County Gaming and Revenue Authority 2022 Rural Community Listening Sessions
	+ Active Erie Transportation Plan
	+ Erie Refocused
	+ Erie’s Inclusive Growth: A Framework for Action

## Quantitative data

Quantitative data was gathered from both primary and secondary sources. Quantitative data from primary data sources included the responses to the closed questions in the survey referenced above, data collected by individual GECAC programs and statistics compiled from federal, state and local sources. The main source for statistics was the US Census Bureau. This data was supplemented by information from the PA Department of Labor & Industry, PA Department of Education, Erie County Department of Health, PA 2-1-1, among others. Whenever possible the most recent data was used and compared to trend data if available. It should be noted that due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic data releases were delayed in many instances so, while not preferable, older data may be used.

## Data analysis

To make meaning out of the data collected, qualitative data was compared to quantitative data to understand the “why” behind the needs identified. Especially important for this assessment was trend data to determine the impact of the pandemic. In addition to reviewing the needs, this assessment also takes an inventory of community resources so that the resulting recommendations represent true gaps in the community.

## Data visuals

To improve the understandability of the information being presented, data visualizations are being used. Color-coded arrows are being used to visualize if trends are heading in a positive, negative or neutral direction. Below is a description of these images:

 = Numbers are going up, which is good

**Positive upward**

 = Numbers are going up, which is bad

**Negative upward**

 = Numbers are going down, which is bad

**Negative downward**

 = Numbers are going down, which is good

**Positive downward**

= Numbers remain relatively the same

**Neutral**

# Community Profile and Critical Community Needs

Data and data analysis in this section has been retrieved from Erie Vital Signs ([www.erievitalsigns.org](http://www.erievitalsigns.org)). Erie Vital Signs is a leadership initiative of The Erie Community Foundation and is aimed at deepening Erie County’s knowledge and understanding of our County. The data and analysis serves as a common source of information on critical topics that affect the health and progress of Erie County in order to inform community stakeholders, spur discussion and collaboration, and monitor our quality of life. Erie Vital Signs was developed with assistance from the Erie County Data Center (<https://eriecountypa.gov/erie-county-data-center/>).

The data gathered from Erie Vital Signs was supplemented with data from the Community Action needs assessment tool made available to Community Action Association of Pennsylvania member agencies (<https://caap.engagementnetwork.org/>) and updated data from the 2020 Decennial Census and 2022 American Community Survey (<https://data.census.gov>).

## General Population Trends

### Population Change

The total population of Erie County as of the 2020 Decennial Census was 280,566. From 2001 to 2020 Erie County has experienced a population decline of -9,690 across all demographic categories, representing a -3.45% change. This gap is expected to increase by a further 2% (approximately -6,359 people) by 2025. The majority of the decrease in population occurred among the White residents of Erie County, at ages 0 to 29 and 40 to 59.



Total Population

**280,566**

for 2020

Erie County, PA (-3.45%)

Pennsylvania (2.36%)

United States (7.13%)

Population Change

2010 to 2020

### Increasing Diversity

While Erie County’s population still is primarily non-Hispanic, white (81.9%), it continues to increase in diversity. The indicator for the Population of Color represents the entire population who identify as Black, Hispanic, Asian, American/ Alaskan native, Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander and two or races. From 2010 to 2020 the Population of Color rose from 37,779 to 51,696 – a 36.8% increase. This rise was primarily fueled by increases in the Asian (52% increase), Other (72% increase), and Two or more races (59% increase).

Population of Color

**19%**

for 2020

Erie County, PA (19%)

Pennsylvania (27%)

United States (42%)

Population of Color

2020


### An Aging Population

The age 60-plus population increased by 14% to 67,967 individuals, accounting for 25% of the total population. The median age also increased from 38.6 to 39.7 as of 2020. It should be noted that this data was all collected prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and will therefore need to be reevaluated to determine the effect these additional deaths had. An aging population carries with it concerns including the decline in working-age population, an increase in health care costs, and all-around changes to the economy.



60+ Population

**25%**

for 2020

Erie County, PA (25%)

Pennsylvania (25%)

United States (22.3%)

Population age 60+

2020

### Income

In 2020, Erie County ranked 41st among Pennsylvania’s 67 counties with a median income of $52,863. This is about 80% of the PA median income of $63,627. Median income is lowest for Black Erie County residents ($23,668) and highest for Erie County’s Asian residents ($58,553). Single-parent, female households have the lowest median income of all household types ($24,247).



Median Income

**$52,863**

for 2020

Erie County, PA ($52,863)

Pennsylvania ($63,627)

United States ($64,994)

Median Income

2020

## Spotlight on Poverty

Erie County, the 15th largest county in Pennsylvania, sits along the south shores of Lake Erie. The county is geographically diverse ranging from the state’s 5th largest city in Erie to rural areas containing acres of farmland and forests. Like many other counties in our state, Erie County is also diverse in income distribution. Poverty stretches among both urban and rural communities. While poverty may manifest differently in urban versus rural areas, the result is the same – a lack of resources to meet one’s basic needs.

### Poverty in Erie County, Pennsylvania

Poverty in Erie County fell from 2012 to 2020. According to the 2020 5-year American Community Survey, 40,103 Erie County residents were living with an income below poverty. This is 15.5%, which is a .6% decrease from 2012.

% below Poverty

**15.5%**

for 2020

% Below Poverty Level

2020 5-year ACS

Erie County, PA (15.5%)

Pennsylvania (12.0%)

United States (12.8%)

### Extreme Poverty

Extreme poverty refers to those families living with incomes below 50% of the poverty level (less than $13,875 annually for a family of 4 in 2022). In 2020, 17,385 individuals in Erie County were living in extreme poverty. This is 6.7% of the total county population and 43.4% of the people living in poverty. This is down slightly from 7.1% in 2012. Poverty is linked with negative conditions such as substandard housing, inadequate nutrition and food insecurity, lack of access to health care, and unsafe neighborhoods. For those in extreme poverty, these effects are compounded.

% Extreme Poverty

**5.5%**

for 2020

Erie County, PA (6.7%)

Pennsylvania (5.4%)

United States (5.8%)

% Extreme Poverty 2020 5-year ACS

### Working Poor

The working poor officially is defined as those individuals who are employed but still living with wages below the poverty level. In 2020, 44.96% of the individuals ages 16+ living in poverty within Erie County met this definition. This amounted to 12,947 individuals and was a higher percentage than both Pennsylvania and the United States. It also was a slight increase from the 44.89% who were working in 2012. Of these individuals the majority were working part-time.

% in Poverty who are Working

**44.96%**

for 2020

Erie County, PA (44.96%)

Pennsylvania (39.5%)

United States (40.3%)

% in Poverty who are Employed

2020 5-year ACS

A secondary definition of working poor refers to those individuals who have income above poverty but below those needed to meet their basic needs. In many instances this is defined as those individuals who have an income between 100-200% poverty. In 2020, an additional 50,191 individuals fell within this 100-200% poverty income level in 2020. This amounts to 19.39% of individuals with incomes between 100-200% and 34.88%, or more than 1/3 of Erie County residents living with incomes which likely do not meet their basic needs. This population also is the population most likely to fall through the cracks for many support programs.

% below 200% Poverty

**34.88%**

for 2020

% below 200% Poverty

2020 5-year ACS

Erie County, PA (34.88%)

Pennsylvania (27.57%)

United States (29.79%)

### Poverty among Families

When looking at poverty rates for families, the presence of children under the age of 18 and marital status of the householder have a significant impact on the likelihood of a family living in poverty. While families in general have a lower poverty rate than the overall poverty rate, families with children under the age of 18 have a higher rate.

### Median Household Incomes

Erie County’s median household income of $52,863 falls below both the US and Pennsylvania median household incomes by about $11,000, ranking Erie 41st among 67 Pennsylvania counties. The median incomes for families, married-couple families and non-families also all fall approximately $7-12 thousand below the same amounts for the state and national rates. These median incomes all have risen since 2010 showing that income is trending in the correct direction; however, expenses also have been trending up during this same time.

Household Median Income

**$52,863**

for 2020

Household Median Income

2020 5-year ACS

Erie County, PA ($52,863)

Pennsylvania ($63,627)

United States ($64,994)

### Median Household Income by Race

Median household incomes vary significantly by race and ethnicity. Both the median household income for White alone, not Hispanic or Latino ($56,609) and Asians ($58,553) fall above the general household median income ($42,863), while those for Two or more races ($41,605), American Indian/ Alaska Native ($40,987), Hispanics ($25,047), and Blacks ($23,668) all fall below. Similar to the general median household income, the median household income for each racial or ethnic group fall below the state and national figures. These figures also all have risen since 2010 indicating this factor is trending in the correct direction.

### Race & Poverty

Poverty is unequally distributed across races; this is an unfortunate reality not only in Erie County, but also throughout the United States.

Across the county, Asian and white residents have the lowest poverty rates at 8.7% and 12.8%, respectively. Black residents, on the other hand, have poverty rates nearly three times the county rate at 40.5%. Also, significantly higher than the county rate are those identifying as some other race (38.5%), Hispanic or Latino residents of any race (38.4%), and those from two or more races (28.7%).

**% of Poverty Population by Race compared to % Total Population by Race**

**Outer circle =** % of poverty population

**Inner circle =** % of total population

### Gender and Poverty

Females in Erie County are more likely to live in poverty than their male counterparts. As there are more females than males in the county, there is a higher percentage and higher absolute number of females in poverty. This holds true regardless of employment status. Across all individuals living in poverty, 56% are female. This equals 16.9% of the female population. For employed individuals, 9.5% of females are living in poverty compared to 5.8% of males. For unemployed individuals, 39.9% of females are in poverty compared to 30.6%. Unfortunately for both males and females, the percentage of employed individuals living in poverty is trending up indicating that wages are not keeping up with the costs of living - especially as it has been proven that families often need 1.5-2 times the poverty limit to actually meet all basic needs.

### Age & Poverty

Different age groups of Erie County residents are affected by poverty in varying degrees with children under the age of 5 experiencing the highest rates of poverty. More than 1 in every 4 children under the age of 5 are living in poverty in Erie County. The next largest affected group is those ages 18-24 where 21.6% are living in poverty and is followed by children ages 5-17 where 1 in every 5 are living in poverty. The group least likely to live in poverty are those age 65+ where 8.2% live in poverty. With the exception of the 60+ age groups, all age bands fare worse in Erie County than the Pennsylvania and United States rates.

### Education & Poverty

Educational attainment is one of the main factors that determine a person’s poverty status; generally, the higher level of educational attainment reached, the less likely one is to be in poverty.

# Community Need

GECAC issued a community-wide survey assessing needs in the areas of transportation, health, nutrition, education, employment, social needs, and senior services. Respondents were asked to answer whether or not they had experienced a need in the 12 months prior to the beginning of the pandemic, if they were currently experiencing the need during the time of the survey (2021-early 2022) or had not experienced the need in the last two years. This allowed for the analysis as to if needs changed during the pandemic.

### Transportation

Needs for the area of transportation were assessed in the areas of access to and cost of public and personal transportation. Needs in this area increased during the pandemic in all categories. Income also had an effect on this area. Individuals with incomes less than $50,000 were more likely to experience transportation needs than the respondent base as a whole.

Of those individuals experiencing a need in this area prior to the pandemic, approximately 1/3 with an access need resolved that issue during the pandemic. Of those individuals reporting a need during the pandemic, nearly half had experienced the need prior to the pandemic also indicating that the pandemic had some, but not substantial, impact on transportation needs.

### Housing

Housing needs were assessed across the full spectrum from homelessness through homeownership. Unlike in many needs surveys in the past, eviction and homelessness were not ranked as the greatest needs. Rather affordability of utilities, home maintenance, rent and mortgage and access to contractors for home repairs topped the list of current needs. As expected, the needs for low-income individuals were greater than those for the population as a whole. One area of note was the significant jump in individuals experiencing difficulty affording utilities after the start of the pandemic as compared to before it began. Just 10.2% of respondents reported challenges with the need prior to the pandemic, while 23% indicated a need during the pandemic. Only 29.5% of the respondents indicated that this was a consistent need both before and during the pandemic.

It’s interesting to note that housing and homelessness had fairly low need scores for survey respondents, as when those same respondents were asked that the 3 biggest challenges were facing our community in the next three years, nearly 1/3 responded with an answer related to this category.

### Employment

Needs in the employment category nearly doubled during the pandemic in many instances. These needs ranged from finding affordable job training to finding jobs which paid a family sustaining wage. This survey was issued after the government lock downs had ended so this continued need speaks to the lasting effects the pandemic had on employers and employees in the region.

### Education



% High School Dropout

2020 PA Dept. of Education

Erie County, PA (1.85%)

Pennsylvania (1.44%)

United States (5.30%)

Cohort Graduation Rate

2019-2020 US Dept of Educ.

Erie County, PA (79.0%)

Pennsylvania (82.3%)

United States (81.9%)

% College Bound

2020 PA Dept. of Education

Erie County, PA (50.20%)

Pennsylvania (60.92%)



% 25+ with no HS Diploma

2017-2021 US Census Bureau

Erie County, PA (8.34%)

Pennsylvania (8.64%)

United States (11.13%)

# Needs Identified by Stakeholders

The needs identified by the respondents to GECAC’s survey and those showing through the public data which is pulled are also reflected in the responses of key stakeholders. GECAC analyzed several plans issued within the community over the last six years, including:

* Erie Refocused
* Erie’s Inclusive Growth: A Framework for Action
* ActiveErie Transportation Plan
* Community Health Improvement Plan
* ECGRA Works to Connect Erie County

Additionally GECAC hired a consultant to interview numerous community stakeholders while conducting a feasibility student to determine the appropriateness for GECAC to build a new location and the types of programs which should be located within it. Stakeholders who contributed to these findings included:

Community Based Organizations

* Erie Downtown Development Corporation
* Jefferson Educational Society
* Erie County Gaming and Revenue Authority
* Various neighborhood centers

Faith based organizations

* Churches from around the region
* St. Martin Center
* Catholic Charities

Private Sector

* Erie Insurance
* Little Caesars Pizza
* Numerous local food service establishments

Public Sector

* County Executive of Erie County
* Erie city Mayor
* Various members of city and county council

Educational institutions

* ECAT
* Erie County Community College
* Northwest Regional Community College

Needs identified by these sectors reflected those identified by others. Economic development, living wage jobs, improved education and a stronger downtown anchor area all topped the list of priorities.