

Community Needs Assessment, 2025

EARLY HEAD START



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HumanKind’s Early Head Start

Established in 2021, HumanKind’s Early Head Start program provides high-quality early childhood education and comprehensive family support services to low-income families in Lynchburg and Bedford, Virginia. Our Lynchburg center is located at 1200 Fenwick Drive and currently serves 48 infants and toddlers in six classrooms. We will be expanding this center, adding four additional classrooms and increasing capacity to serve a total of 90 children.

Our Bedford center is located within the Bedford Christian Church at 1938 Moneta Road and serves 16 children in two classrooms.

During the 2024 calendar year, our Early Head Start centers served 114 children and 396 family members. Children from birth to age three are eligible for Early Head Start Services if their families meet federal poverty guidelines. Additionally, children are categorically eligible - regardless of income – if they are in foster care, experiencing homelessness, or from families receiving public assistance such as TANF, SSI, or SNAP. Early Head Start programs must also ensure that at least 10% of their enrollment is filled by children eligible for services under Section 619 or Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

From January through December 2024, the children served by HumanKind’s Early Head Start program fell into the following categories:

Category	Count/Percentage
Children living in households with income below the federal poverty level	97 children (93%)
Children experiencing homelessness	15 children (13%)
Children with disabilities	24 children (21%)
Children in foster care	18 children (16%)
Children being raised by single parents	56 children (49%)

Community Overview

Population and Density

Bedford County, the town of Bedford, and Lynchburg city present distinct demographic and geographic profiles within Virginia. Bedford County, with a total population of 82,182ⁱ, spans a large area of 760.1 square milesⁱⁱ, resulting in a low population density of 108 people per square mile. In contrast, the town of Bedford, with a population of 6,777ⁱⁱⁱ, is much more densely populated, with 995 people per square mile within its 6.81 square miles^{iv}. Lynchburg, a more urban area, has a population of 79,535^v and a higher density of 1,623 people per square mile within its 49 square miles^{vi}. These figures reflect varying degrees of urbanization, with Bedford County being predominantly rural, Bedford Town relatively more populated but still small, and Lynchburg being an urban center in the region.

Description	Bedford County	Bedford Town	Lynchburg	Virginia
Total Population ^{vii}	82,182	6,777	79,535	8,811,195
Population per Square Mile	108	995	1,623	223
Total Area in Square Miles ^{viii}	760.1	6.81 ^{ix}	49.0	39,471.7

Financial and Poverty Metrics

Financial disparities are stark across these regions. The overall poverty rate in Bedford County is 9.9%, significantly lower than the 20.4% in the town of Bedford and 17.4% in Lynchburg^x. This trend is also seen among children. In Bedford County, 17.0%^{xi} of children under 18 live below the poverty level, compared to an alarming 49.2%^{xii} in the town of Bedford and 24.5%^{xiii} in Lynchburg. For children under 5, the data is unable to determine a precise rate for the town of Bedford, but Lynchburg shows a concerning 19.8% and Bedford County stands at 20.0%, both higher than Virginia's rate of 12.6%^{xiv}.

The median household income also highlights economic disparities. Bedford County boasts a median income of \$77,644, significantly higher than the town of Bedford's (\$47,697) and Lynchburg's (\$59,808). Virginia overall has a median household income of \$90,974, which puts Bedford County, the town of Bedford, and Lynchburg, all below the state average.^{xv}

Financial Comparison	Bedford County	Bedford Town	Lynchburg	Virginia
Overall Poverty Rate ^{xvi}	9.9%	20.4%	17.4%	10.2%
Children under 18 living below poverty level ^{xvii}	17.0%	49.2% ^{xviii}	24.5%	12.7%
Children under age 5 living below poverty level ^{xix}	20.0%	Unable to determine	19.8%	12.6%
Median Household Income ^{xx}	\$77,644	\$47,697	\$59,808	\$90,974

Family Structure

Family structure is a key social determinant of health and educational outcomes in early childhood. Children growing up in non-traditional households experience distinct strengths and challenges that need to be considered when planning services. By working alongside the Lynchburg Department of Social Services, HumanKind's Early Head Start helps strengthen families and creates a supportive foundation for children navigating unique household dynamics.

Single-Parent Households

Caregivers in single-parent households often carry the full responsibility for income, caregiving, and household management, which can compound parental stress that can, in turn, spark challenges and adverse outcomes for their children.^{xxi} In Lynchburg, the percentage of children living in single parent households (47.1%) is higher than that of the state (31.3%), while Bedford County's is less (23.8%).^{xxii} Children in these households are more likely to experience poverty, making them more likely to have physical, mental, and behavioral problems, disrupted brain development, and shorter educational trajectories.^{xxiii} This makes access to stable, high-quality early learning environments especially critical.

Children in Foster Care

Children in foster care have often experienced abuse, neglect, or family disruption. These circumstances can interrupt healthy attachment and development, and the children benefit from trauma-informed early education settings that provide stability, routine, and emotional support.^{xxiv} 43% of children in foster care in Lynchburg and 20% in Bedford County are five years old or younger.^{xxv} Early Head Start can be a protective factor, helping young children in foster care develop secure relationships and prepare for lifelong learning and resilience.

Kinship Care

Grandparents and extended family members frequently step in to care for children during times of family instability, forming what is known as kinship care arrangements. While kinship placements can offer emotional continuity and cultural familiarity, caregivers often face barriers related to legal guardianship, housing eligibility, and financial strain.^{xxvi} In Virginia, 13% of foster care placements are into kinship care.^{xxvii}

Housing and Homelessness

Lynchburg experiences a greater affordable housing shortfall (-78.9) than the state (-73) or the nation (-53.4).^{xxviii} This is a measure of the availability of affordable housing relative to the community's low-income population, with negative numbers indicating a shortfall. Living without access to affordable, stable housing negatively impacts one's mental, physical, and emotional health.

Children experiencing housing instability or homelessness are more likely to experience "chronic diseases, behavioral health concerns, developmental delays, hunger, and malnutrition than those who have homes".^{xxix} During the 2022-23 school year, 222^{xxx} of the 7,909^{xxxi} students enrolled in Lynchburg City Schools were identified as homeless. That percentage (2.8%) matches that of the nation (2.8%)^{xxxii} and exceeds the state (0.9%)^{xxxiii} Fewer Bedford County students (0.9%) identified as homeless (85^{xxxiv} of the 9,089^{xxxv}), matching Virginia's percentage.

	Bedford County	Lynchburg	Virginia	United States
Affordable Housing Shortfall ^{xxxvi}	-55.9	-78.9	-73	-53.4
Homeless Children (enrolled in public school)	.9%	2.8%	.9%	2.8%

To minimize the negative impacts of housing instability on the children it serves, HumanKind's Early Head Start works with the Salvation Army, Miriam's House, and Continuum of Care to support its families in finding and maintaining stable housing.

Food Insecurity

The food security of a child's home (a household's social and economic ability to access adequate food) can have serious implications for their physical and mental health, academic achievement and future economic prosperity^{xxxvii}.

In Lynchburg, 14.9% of residents experience food insecurity, which is higher than both Virginia's rate of 12.1% and the US rate of 14.3%. In contrast, Bedford County's food insecurity rate stands at 10.7%, below the state and national averages.^{xxxviii}

Compounding this issue is the Food Environment Index Score, a measure of access to healthy foods within a community. Lynchburg scores 11.03, significantly lower than the state average of 13.85 and the national average of 16.25, suggesting more limited access to healthy food options. Bedford County's score is notably higher at 25.30, indicating a far more favorable food environment.^{xxxix}

	Bedford County	Lynchburg	Virginia	United States
Food Insecurity Rate ^{xl}	10.7%	14.9%	12.1%	14.3%
Food Environment Index Score ^{xli}	25.30	11.03	13.85	16.25

Public school data provides additional context. In the 2024-25 school year, 58.34% of Bedford County Schools students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch.^{xliii} Starting in the 2023-24 school year, Lynchburg City Schools began participating in the Community Eligibility Provision, which allows the highest poverty schools and school divisions to offer free breakfast and lunch to all students^{xliiii}, a clear indicator of widespread economic hardship.

With more households struggling to obtain enough food to eat and less healthy food available in our community, Lynchburg families struggle to maintain nutritious diets. This negatively impacts children in a variety of ways. Research has shown an “association between food insecurity and delayed development in young children; risk of chronic illnesses like asthma and anemia; and behavioral problems like hyperactivity, anxiety and aggression in school-age children”.^{xliiv}

HumanKind’s Early Head Start partners with the Virginia Cooperative Extension, Child Care Resources Inc., and Parkview Community Mission’s Food for Thought program to ensure children receive nutritious meals in the centers while also equipping families with the resources and guidance to provide healthy food at home.

Social Services Supports

Access to social services is crucial for many families, particularly those with young children. These supports help address basic needs such as nutrition, housing, and utilities, contributing to family stability and child development.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

Access to nutritious food is foundational to a child’s growth, learning, and long-term health. SNAP helps low-income families stretch their grocery budgets, ensuring access to healthy foods vital to well-being. In 2023, 13.4%^{xliv} of Lynchburg residents relied on SNAP benefits, a rate significantly higher than in Bedford County (8.0%)^{xlvi}, the Commonwealth of Virginia (9.7%)^{xlvii}, and the nation (12.6%)^{xlviii}. This disparity highlights the heightened food insecurity facing families in our community.

For many families enrolled in HumanKind’s Early Head Start program, the reliable provision of nutritious food is a critical support. The program provides meals and snacks that meet one-half to two-thirds of each child’s daily nutritional needs, helping to fill dietary gaps and easing the burden on parents working to provide healthy, well-balanced meals on limited resources. In doing so, Early Head Start ensures that children start each day nourished, supported, and prepared to thrive.

As part of our commitment to healthy development and food access, HumanKind’s Health and Disabilities Manager maintains on-site garden beds at our Lynchburg center. These gardens serve as a resource for our Early Head Start program—fresh vegetables harvested are incorporated into nutritious meals prepared by our caterers for the children. Surplus produce is shared directly with families, helping to ease food insecurity and foster healthy eating habits at home. This initiative not only supports child wellness but also reflects our values of sustainability and holistic family care.

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)

TANF offers financial support to families with children experiencing economic hardship. It’s designed to be a temporary safety net, promoting family stability and self-sufficiency and is often paired with work-related requirements and supportive services such as childcare and job training. While only a small percentage of the population receive TANF benefits, Lynchburg has a higher concentration of families

relying on TANF (.89%) than Bedford County (.20%) and Virginia (.33%), highlighting a deeper level of economic distress within the city.

	Number of TANF Recipients ^{xlix}	Population ⁱ	% of population receiving TANF
Bedford County	165	82,182	.20%
Lynchburg	711	79,535	.89%
Virginia	29,143	8,811,195	.33%

Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)

WIC is a short-term intervention program for low-income pregnant and post-partum women, infants and children up to age five who are at nutritional risk. It’s designed to influence lifetime nutrition and health behaviors.

WIC is a critical, short-term intervention that supports the health and nutrition of low-income pregnant and post-partum women, infants, and children up to age five who are at nutritional risk. While designed as a temporary benefit, WIC has long-term impacts – helping to establish healthy eating habits, improve birth outcomes, and support early childhood development during a child’s most formative years.

In our service area, WIC participation levels highlight the number of families relying on supplemental nutrition support. In Bedford County, 580 individuals are served by WIC; in Lynchburg, that figure is significantly higher, with 2016 individuals served.ⁱⁱ As with previous forms of financial social support, the percent of Lynchburg residents receiving WIC (2.53%) is greater than that of Bedford County (.71%) and the Commonwealth of Virginia (1.39%).

	Number of WIC Recipients ⁱⁱ	Population ^{liii}	% of population receiving WIC
Bedford County	580	82,182	.71%
Lynchburg	2016	79,535	2.53%
Virginia	122,239	8,811,195	1.39%

Supplemental Security Income (SSI)

Administered by Social Security, SSI is a monthly benefit to people with limited income and resources who are blind, age 65 or older, or have a qualifying disability. Children with disabilities or who are blind may also get SSI.

While 1.29% of Bedford County’s population receives SSI benefits, slightly below Virginia’s at 1.66%, Lynchburg’s rate is almost double, with 3.03% of its population relying on SSI. The higher percentage in Lynchburg points to a community with increased financial hardships, where demand for public benefits and family support services is more pronounced.

	Number of SSI recipients ^{liv}	Population ^{lv}	% of population receiving SSI
Bedford County	1058	82,182	1.29%
Lynchburg	2412	79,535	3.03%
Virginia	146,679	8,811,195	1.66%

With Lynchburg residents' higher reliance on social support services, the current threats to reduce these benefits could significantly harm low-income families, leading to increased food insecurity, poorer health outcomes, and negatively impacting their overall well-being.

Transportation

The city of Lynchburg and Bedford County are both vehicle dependent regions. Bedford County, which is largely rural, does not have a public transportation system, but Lynchburg offers bus service. The Greater Lynchburg Transit Company (GLTC) runs from 5:00 am to 10:15 pm on Monday through Friday, from 6:00 am to 10:15 pm on Saturday, and from 7:45 am to 7:15 pm on Sunday.^{lvi} Despite having public transportation, Lynchburg has a transit score of 21, indicating that the existing options may not be sufficient to meet the needs of all residents.^{lvii}

Lynchburg has a Walk Score of 29, which means that it's a car-dependent city and most errands require a vehicle.^{lviii} Unsurprisingly, mostly rural Bedford County has a walkability score of 0.^{lix} With limited or nonexistent public transportation and a reduced ability to walk to needed services, Lynchburg and Bedford County residents depend upon personal vehicles to get to work, to the grocery store, to the doctor's office, etc.

HumanKind serves as a community resource for personal transportation through its Ways to Work program. Ways to Work offers a lifeline to low- to moderate-income individuals with challenging credit histories who struggle to secure reliable transportation. Through fair-interest vehicle loans paired with financial education and personalized coaching, Ways to Work helps meet clients' immediate transportation needs while supporting their long-term goals of achieving financial stability.

Childcare

Availability of childcare

The availability of childcare continues to be a challenge for families in the City of Lynchburg and Bedford County. There are 4,881 children under the age of five in Lynchburg and 3,920 in Bedford County^{lx}, but an estimated capacity to serve 3,113 of those children in Lynchburg and 1,963 in Bedford.^{lxi} That leaves just over 3,500 children under the age of five without childcare.

The scarcity of childcare options is not just a matter of convenience but a significant barrier to economic stability and child development. In areas where families are already grappling with economic hardship, the lack of childcare options is particularly acute. Overlaying childcare availability with poverty levels in the region highlights that the most underserved areas are also those with higher concentrations of poverty, emphasizing the intertwined challenges of economic instability and inadequate childcare access. This intersection exacerbates the obstacles faced by low-income families, limiting their ability to seek employment or further education and contributing to the perpetuation of poverty cycles.

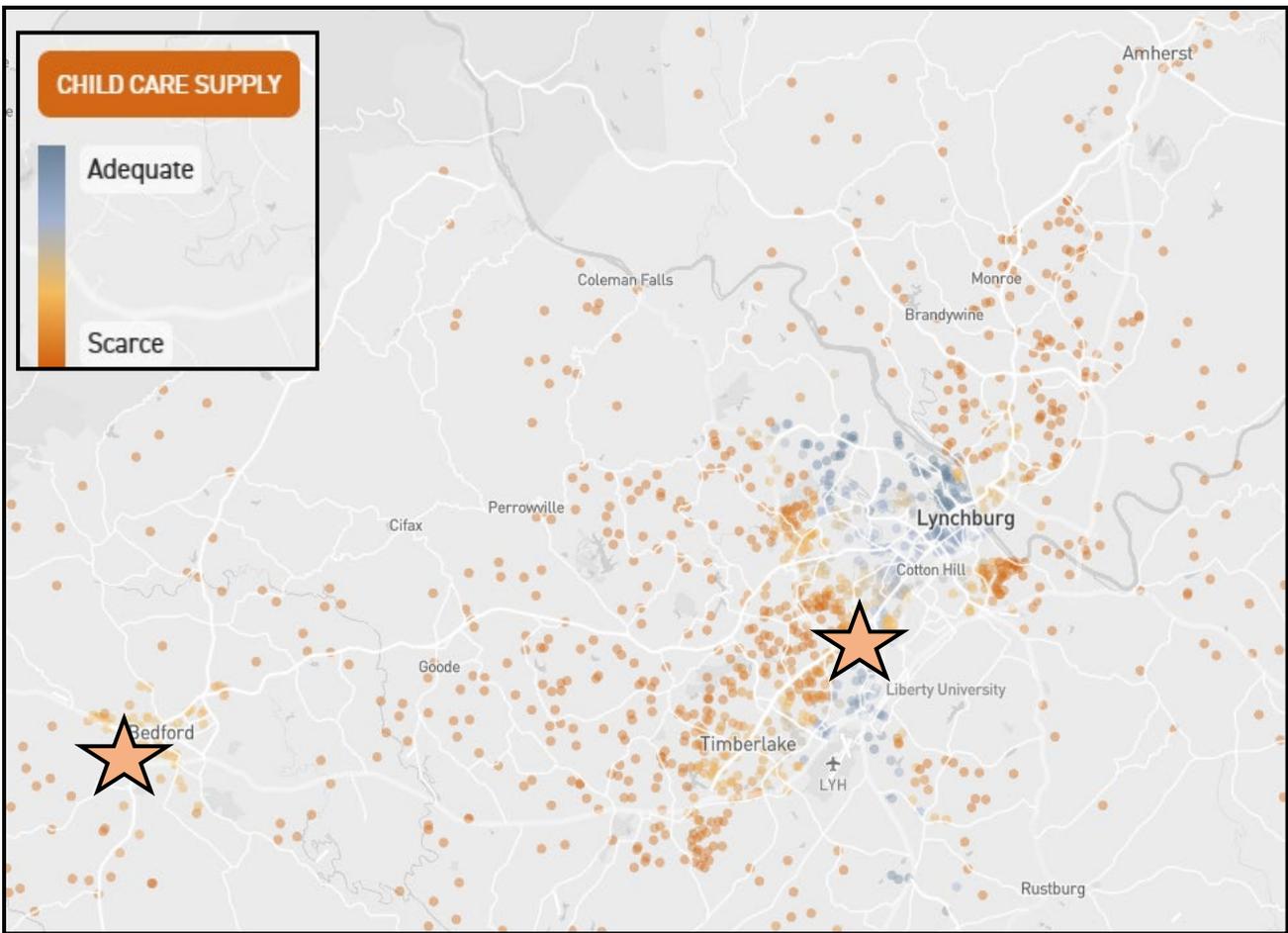


Figure 1 From childcaredeserts.org, the stars mark HumanKind's Early Head Start centers, which sit in and near areas with a scarcity of childcare availability.

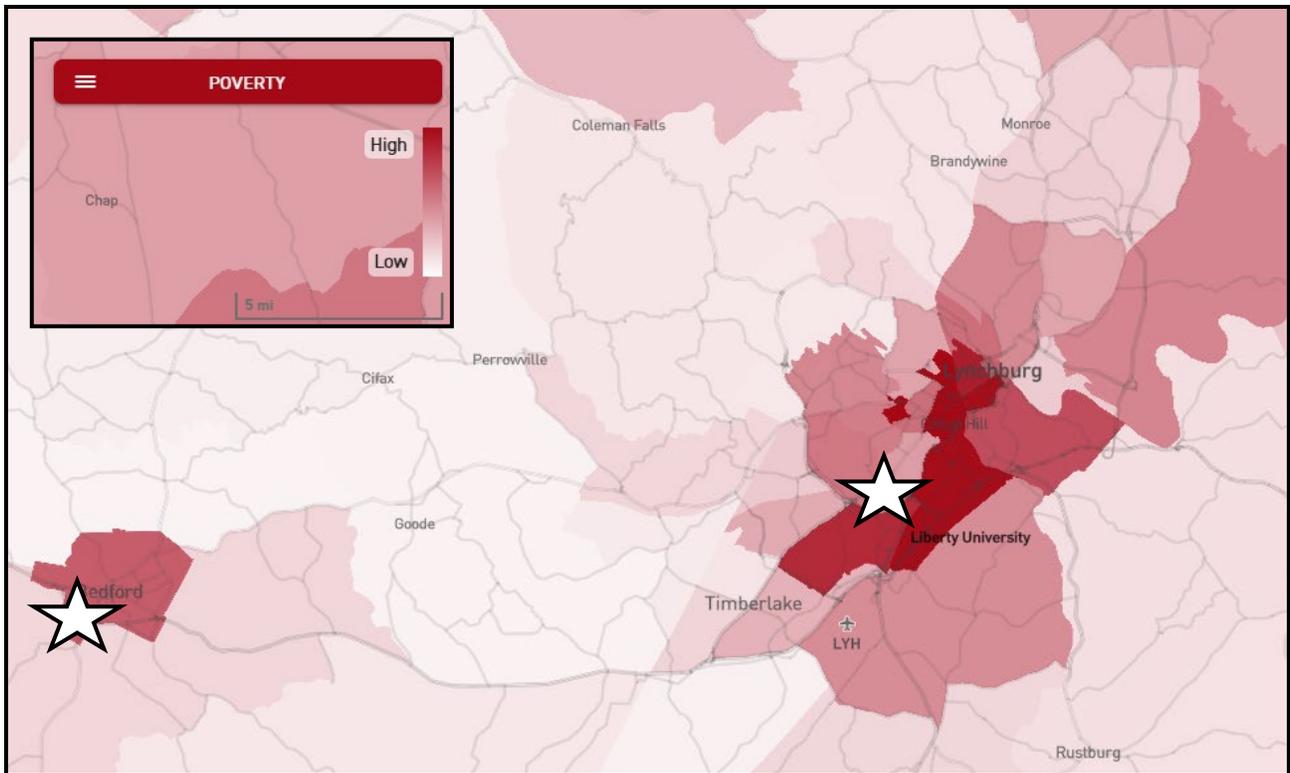


Figure 2 From childcaredeserts.org, the stars mark HumanKind's Early Head Start centers, which sit in and near areas with a prevalence of poverty.

Affordability of childcare

Affordable childcare is defined as costing no more than 7% of a household’s income. In Lynchburg, the median annual cost of infant care is \$11,440. To meet the affordability benchmark, a family would need to earn \$163,429 per year. Toddler care costs \$10,296 annually, which would require a household income of \$147,086.^{lxii} In comparison, the median household income in Lynchburg is just \$59,808.^{lxiii}

In Bedford County, the median annual cost of toddler care is \$11,830.^{lxiv} To afford this under the 7% guideline, families would need to earn \$169,000 annually. The county’s median household income, however, is \$77,644.^{lxv}

These figures reveal a significant gap between the cost of care and what families actually earn. As a result, many parents are forced to reduce work hours, rely on informal care, or leave the workforce entirely. This affects not only family stability, but also early childhood development and the region’s labor force.

Expanding access to affordable, high-quality childcare is critical for supporting working families and strengthening the local economy. It is a shared challenge—and a shared opportunity—for both Lynchburg and Bedford County.

Eligible infants/toddlers

Early Head Start services are targeted to infants and toddlers in our community who are most in need – children living in foster care, experiencing homelessness, with disabilities, or living in poverty. Our 64 childcare slots are impactful but leave many of the nearly 2,000 infants and toddlers living in poverty unserved.

	Bedford County	Lynchburg
Number of children under 5 years ^{lxvi}	3,920	4,881
Number of children under 5 years living in poverty ^{lxvii}	760	917
Number of children 5 years and under in foster care ^{lxviii}	27	96

In 2024, 24 of the 114 children served (21%) by HumanKind’s Early Head Start had identified special needs. In addition to prioritizing enrollment for these children, many are recognized as having developmental delays or other challenges when the first developmental screening is completed within 45 days of enrollment.

The proportion of children requiring special education or related supports in our service area closely mirrors national trends, where 15% of public-school students received such services during the 2022-23 school year.^{lxix} Locally, 15% of students in Lynchburg City Schools and 12.3% of students in Bedford County Public Schools were identified as needing individualized support during the 2024-25 school year.^{lxx}

Healthcare

Centra’s 2024-2027 Lynchburg Area Community Health Needs Assessment reports that “All of the localities in the service area, with the exception of Campbell County, are designated as federal Medically Underserved Areas and all localities are designated as Health Professional Shortage Areas for Primary Care, Mental Health, and Dental.”^{lxxi} Centra’s 2024-2027 Bedford Area Community Health Needs Assessment reported similarly on Bedford County, stating that it is also “designated as a federal

Medically Underserved Area and as Health Professional Shortage Area for Primary Care, Mental Health, and Dental.^{lxxii} HumanKind staff identified this gap in dental care for toddlers and collaborated with the Johnson Health Center to bring a Mobile Dental Unit to its Early Head Start centers on a biannual basis.

To ensure comprehensive, wraparound care for the children and families we serve, HumanKind’s Early Head Start program established a Health and Mental Health Services Advisory Committee (HMH-SAC). This multidisciplinary team includes local pediatricians, behavioral health specialists, Infant & Toddler Connection representatives, lactation consultants, and other community health partners. The committee meets in person annually and maintains ongoing virtual collaboration throughout the year. Recognizing that young children thrive when their care providers work in unison, we intentionally foster these partnerships to strengthen our collective impact and deliver holistic, family-centered support.

An inability to access healthcare, alongside poor health choices, leads to a life expectancy in Lynchburg (74.1 years) that is less than that of Virginia (78.1 years) and the United States (75.8 years).^{lxxiii}

^{lxxiv}	Bedford County	Lynchburg	Virginia	United States
Population with no health insurance	7.5%	7.5%	8.0%	11.5%
Diabetes Prevalence	8.6%	11.5%	9.9%	10.6%
Obesity Prevalence	35.7%	38.4%	34.5%	37.4%
Life Expectancy (in years)	77.8	74.1	78.1	75.8

Maternal and Child Health

Maternal and infant health outcomes offer critical insight into community well-being. From 2016 to 2020, Bedford County saw a decline in births—from 711 to 631—while Lynchburg experienced a 23% increase, rising from 969 to 1,193. This growth places added demand on maternal health services in Lynchburg, while Bedford’s decline may reflect broader demographic shifts.^{lxxv}

Total live births by place of residence ^{lxxvi}					
	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Bedford County	711	678	663	646	631
Lynchburg	969	1170	1130	1130	1193

Maternal mortality, a key indicator of healthcare access and quality, remains a concern. From 2019–2023, Virginia’s maternal mortality rate was 34.5 deaths per 100,000 live births. Lynchburg’s rate was significantly higher at 50.6, while Bedford County reported a slightly lower rate of 30.1.^{lxxvii}

	Bedford County	Lynchburg	Virginia
Maternal Mortality (per 100,000 live births), 2019-2023 ^{lxxviii}	30.1	50.6	34.5

Infant mortality also reflects systemic health disparities. In 2022, Virginia’s rate was 6.2 infant deaths per 1,000 live births, above the national average of 5.6. From 2019–2022, Bedford County’s average was lower at 5.0, but Lynchburg’s was considerably higher at 8.6.^{lxxix}

	Bedford County	Lynchburg	Virginia
Infant Mortality (per 1,000 live births) ^{lxxx}	5.0	8.6	6.2

These trends underscore the need for targeted investments in maternal and infant health—particularly in Lynchburg, where rising birth rates are paired with persistently poor health outcomes for mothers and babies. Families in our community are navigating complex health and social challenges that can jeopardize the well-being of both parent and child during the most critical years of development.

In response, HumanKind’s Healthy Families Central Virginia (HFCV) program offers a proven, evidence-based solution. As a nationally accredited parent support and infant health home visiting initiative, HFCV is a referral source for Early Head Start families who could benefit from additional supports. The program begins with a comprehensive assessment to understand each family’s unique strengths and challenges, then delivers individualized support through regular home visits. These visits include screenings for depression, substance use, intimate partner violence, parent-child interaction quality, and home safety. By strengthening protective factors and reducing risks, HFCV can work alongside Early Head Start to lay a strong foundation for healthy childhood development and long-term family stability.

Unemployment

In Bedford County, the unemployment rate for individuals aged 16 and older stands at 4.1%, which exceeds the Virginia average of 3.7% and closely mirrors the national rate of 4.3%. In contrast, Lynchburg reports a lower overall unemployment rate of 2.7%, falling below both state and national figures.^{lxxxi}

In Bedford County, the economic strain is further reflected in the high percentage of working individuals living below the poverty line: 48.3%, compared to 46.6% in Virginia and 47.8% nationwide.^{lxxxii} These figures highlight the urgent need for targeted supports that empower families to overcome barriers to work and achieve lasting financial stability.

Region	Labor Force Participation Rate – Below Poverty Level ^{lxxxiii}	Unemployment Rate (16 years and older) ^{lxxxiv}
Bedford County	48.3%	4.1%
Lynchburg	41.6%	2.7%
Virginia	46.6%	3.7%
United States	47.8%	4.3%

HumanKind serves as the One Stop Operator for Virginia Career Works–Central Region, providing a direct resource for Early Head Start parents who are exploring employment opportunities or seeking career services such as resume preparation, job search strategies, interviewing techniques, and basic computer skills. Family Engagement Specialists work closely with parents to assess their goals and connect them with workforce development supports that help them secure or advance in employment.

Safety

Crime and the fear of crime can negatively impact one’s health and well-being, eroding a sense of safety and leading to increased stress and anxiety. Children exposed to violence are at risk for “long-term behavioral and mental health outcomes, such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder, regardless of whether they are victims, direct witnesses, or hear about the crime”.^{lxxxv}

While the rate of violent crime in the town of Bedford (221 crimes per 100,000 people) is less than that of the state (236 per 100,000) and the nation (364 per 100,000), Lynchburg’s rate (335 per 100,000) falls between the two. Property crime rates for both the town of Bedford (2,111 per 100,000) and Lynchburg (2,009 per 100,000) exceed that of Virginia (1,659 per 100,000) and the United States (1,917 per 100,000).^{lxxxvi}

	Town of Bedford	Lynchburg	Virginia	United States
Violent Crimes (per 100,000 people) ^{lxxxvii}	221	335	236	364
Property Crimes (per 100,000 people) ^{lxxxviii}	2,111	2,009	1,659	1,917

Violent crimes as reported by the Lynchburg Police Department have decreased over the past several years, which has been attributed to Ceasefire Virginia, a partnership between the Attorney General’s Office and the city^{lxxxix} that invests in gang prevention and community policing in high-crime neighborhoods.^{xc} However, violent crimes in Bedford County (as reported by the Bedford County Sheriff’s Office) increased in 2023, following several years of decreasing numbers. Violent crimes reported by the Bedford Police Department, which has jurisdiction over the town of Bedford, remained the same in 2023, following several years of increasing numbers. Following increases over several years, property crimes reported by all three policing agencies decreased in 2023.^{xci}

	Bedford County Sheriff		Bedford Police Department		Lynchburg Police Department	
	Property Crimes	Violent Crimes	Property Crimes	Violent Crimes	Property Crimes	Violent Crimes
2020	501	93	101	5	1,358	367
2021	491	82	138	10	1,667	334
2022	542	78	203	15	1,963	286
2023	412	88	143	15	1,616	271

Education

Early Head Start plays a vital role in the lives of young children facing significant barriers, such as poverty or developmental delays, by laying the foundation for long-term academic and personal success. With a holistic focus on physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development, the program ensures that children enter school ready to learn and thrive.

The importance of Early Head Start becomes even clearer when examining achievement data from third-grade Standards of Learning (SOL) assessments. Students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and those with disabilities consistently perform well below their peers, highlighting an urgent need for early intervention.

2023-24 Pass Rate – Grade 3 Assessments ^{xcii}						
	Reading			Math		
	Bedford	Lynchburg	Virginia	Bedford	Lynchburg	Virginia
All Students	70%	55%	67%	77%	59%	70%
Students with Disabilities	35%	32%	42%	37%	36%	44%
Economically Disadvantaged Students	57%	44%	54%	63%	51%	57%

These gaps are not just numbers—they represent children who may fall further behind without early, sustained support. By reaching children during the most critical years of brain development, Early Head Start interrupts the cycle of poverty and helps close the achievement gap before it widens.

Current high school dropout data illustrates the long-term impact when those achievement gaps have not been reduced. The overall dropout rate for Lynchburg exceeds that of Virginia, with Bedford County slightly below Virginia. Among vulnerable populations, however, disparities are even more pronounced. Both Bedford County and Lynchburg dropout rates for students with disabilities exceed that of Virginia, with Lynchburg’s rate nearly triple Virginia’s. For economically disadvantaged students, Lynchburg is slightly below the Virginia rate, with Bedford County’s rate exceeding Virginia’s rate.

High School Dropout Rates ^{xciii}			
	Bedford County	Lynchburg	Virginia
All Students	4.1%	6.3%	4.5%
Students with Disabilities	8.8%	20.8%	7.3%
Economically Disadvantaged Students	7.3%	5.7%	6.0%

These figures underscore the importance of high-quality early childhood programs. Children who start behind often stay behind: early gaps in language and cognitive development are strong predictors of later academic struggles and school disengagement.^{xciv} Early Head Start mitigates these risks by supporting healthy development, school readiness, and family engagement from birth – helping children build the skills they need to succeed long before they reach third grade or face critical decisions in high school.

Implications for Social Services and Community Programs

Our regional healthcare provider, Centra, conducted their Community Health Needs Assessments for both the Bedford and Lynchburg areas in 2024. Respondents were asked which social/support resources are hard to get in the community. In the Lynchburg area, the top 5 responses were (1) affordable/safe housing; (2) childcare; (3) healthy food; (4) rent/utilities assistance; and (5) transportation.^{xcv} In the Bedford area, the responses were (1) affordable/safe housing; (2) childcare; (3) transportation; (4) healthy food; and (5) employment/job assistance.^{xcvi}

The data underscores the pressing need for targeted social services and community support in Lynchburg and Bedford County, especially for children and families living in poverty. Programs that address early childhood education, healthcare, nutrition, and family support are crucial in these areas to bridge the economic gaps and provide equitable opportunities for all residents.

Efforts to boost economic development and increase access to higher-paying jobs could help elevate median incomes and reduce poverty rates. This narrative illustrates the various challenges and opportunities within Bedford County, the town of Bedford, and in Lynchburg, highlighting the importance of tailored approaches to community development and social support.

Summary of Key Findings and Strategic Priorities

The 2025 Community Needs Assessment reveals a sobering yet galvanizing picture of the conditions facing young children and families in Lynchburg and Bedford County. Despite the resilience of our communities, deep economic hardship, health disparities, and a shortage of early childhood supports continue to pose significant challenges—particularly for infants and toddlers living in poverty.

Key Findings

- **Widespread Economic Need:** Nearly 93% of children served by HumanKind’s Early Head Start program live below the federal poverty level. In Lynchburg, the child poverty rate reaches 24.5%, with the town of Bedford facing even higher levels at 49.2%.
- **Insufficient Access to Childcare:** Over 3,500 children under age five lack access to licensed childcare. The cost of infant care far exceeds what most families in the region can afford, compounding economic strain and limiting workforce participation.
- **Concerning Maternal and Infant Health Indicators:** Lynchburg’s maternal mortality rate (50.6 per 100,000) and infant mortality rate (8.6 per 1,000) exceed the state average, pointing to critical gaps in access to perinatal and pediatric care.
- **High Dependency on Public Supports:** Any cuts SNAP, WIC, TANF, and SSI could significantly harm Early Head Start families, increasing food insecurity and instability.
- **Gaps in School Readiness and Achievement:** Students from low-income backgrounds and those with disabilities are falling behind in early elementary years. Without robust early intervention, many face diminished educational and life outcomes.

Strategic Priorities

To respond to these needs, HumanKind recommends the following strategic actions:

- **Expand Early Head Start Capacity:** Increase classroom slots and staffing, especially in Lynchburg, to meet growing demand and reduce the number of infants and toddlers left unserved.
- **Enhance Wraparound Health Supports:** Strengthen partnerships in maternal and child health, build on the success of our mobile dental and mental health services, and integrate Healthy Families Central Virginia support for high-risk families.
- **Safeguard Family Stability Through Advocacy:** Engage in proactive advocacy around federal benefit programs (SNAP, WIC, TANF) and equip stakeholders with stories and data that illustrate the consequences of disinvestment.
- **Address Food and Transportation Barriers:** Expand on-site gardens, deepen food access partnerships, and integrate transportation supports such as HumanKind’s Ways to Work into family case planning.
- **Ensure Equity and Targeted Outreach:** Use data to ensure priority enrollment for the most vulnerable groups—children experiencing homelessness, living in foster care, or with developmental delays or other special needs.

This assessment affirms the vital role of Early Head Start in disrupting cycles of poverty, supporting school readiness, and creating opportunities for family resilience. It also underscores the importance of ongoing, coordinated investment in early childhood infrastructure across our region.

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