



Mercer Island Youth & Family Services

Community Needs Assessment | June 2024



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Founded in 1988, we are an interdisciplinary strategy and analysis firm providing integrated, creative, and analytically rigorous approaches to complex policy and planning decisions. Our team of strategic planners, policy and financial analysts, economists, cartographers, information designers and facilitators work together to bring new ideas, clarity, and robust frameworks to the development of analytically-based and action-oriented plans.

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Table of Contents

Purpose and Context	4
Who is MIYFS?.....	4
Why this study?	4
What did we do?.....	4
What did we find?.....	5
Findings.....	7
Community Demographics.....	7
Race and Ethnicity	8
Foreign-Born Population and Languages Spoken.....	10
Age Distribution.....	12
Youth Sexual Orientation.....	12
Youth Mental Wellbeing.....	13
Depression and Suicidal Ideation.....	13
Impacts of Remote School.....	18
Social Media and Technology.....	18
Perception of Success	20
Drugs and Alcohol.....	22
Youth	22
Adults	23
Parenting	24
Community and Connection.....	25
Trends in Older Adults.....	28
Financial Distress	32
Students from households with low incomes	35
Basic Needs	36
Conclusion.....	37

Purpose and Context

Who is MIYFS?

Mercer Island Youth & Family Services (MIYFS) aims to provide human services and behavioral health support on Mercer Island to support the wellbeing of residents across the lifespan. Founded in 1973, MIYFS is a department of the City of Mercer Island working in partnership with local and regional community organizations. MIYFS is part of the network of King County Youth and Family Service agencies but is unique in that it is a department of the City of Mercer Island, while other sister agencies are independent, nonprofit organizations. MIYFS is also unique in that it does not participate in the Medicaid system or directly bill insurance companies for mental health care, instead operating on a fee-for-service model. This operational model is supported by historic third-party assessments that have found MIYFS would be unsustainable if it were not a city department, partially due to the low occurrence of Medicaid eligibility in Mercer Island, an affluent Seattle suburb.

Currently, MIYFS provides both direct and indirect services to support a continuum of care approach to human service provision in the community. MIYFS provides direct services to residents, including individual and family counseling, school-based mental health services, senior services, emergency assistance programs, food security programming, substance abuse prevention, and mental health promotion programming. Additionally, MIYFS refers residents to organizations for other essential services that MIYFS does not directly provide. MIYFS provides funding to organizations for these services through a pooled funding agreement with other Eastside Cities, including contracts with Eastside Legal Assistance Program; King County Sexual Assault Resource Center; The Sophia Way; LifeWire; and Congregations for the Homeless.

MIYFS operations are linked to the Mercer Island Thrift Shop, a retail business run by the City of Mercer Island and a vibrant community hub for local volunteerism. The Thrift Shop is largely staffed by volunteers and sales proceeds fund a major portion of the MIYFS budget.

Why this study?

MIYFS partnered with BERK Consulting to conduct a data-driven community needs assessment to understand the health and human service needs of residents. The purpose of this assessment is to provide MIYFS with an understanding of how demographics, human service needs, and gaps have changed in recent years, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic. MIYFS will use findings to inform future programming, resource allocation, and service delivery.

What did we do?

This assessment combined qualitative and quantitative data to understand how Mercer Island's population and human service needs and gaps have changed since 2019.

The quantitative data is from the following secondary data sources:

- U.S. Census American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year Estimates
- U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)

- Public Health Seattle & King County City Health Profiles
- Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI)
- Washington State Healthy Youth Survey

Qualitative data was collected through several focus groups:

- Five focus groups explored community needs, gaps, impacts of the pandemic, and current MIYFS services:
 - **Mercer Island Youth and Family Services staff**, including elementary, middle, and high school counselors, outpatient counselors, clinical supervisors, coordinators, and thrift shop staff.
 - **Older adults**, including senior residents, volunteers and representatives of Island organizations or groups supporting seniors including Mercer Island Visual Arts League (MIVAL), Mercer Island Parks and Recreation, Senior Foundation, Northwest Parkinson’s Foundation, MI Chinese Association (MICA), Alzheimer’s support groups, and the MIYFS geriatric specialist and MIYFS Foundation Executive Director.
 - **Mercer Island High School students** ranging from 9th to 12th grade
 - **Mercer Island School District staff**, including school district administrators, school district counselors, primary and secondary teachers, elementary, middle, and high school principals, and parents.
 - **First responders and customer-facing MIYFS staff**, including the Chief of Police, Parks and Recreation staff, Thrift Shop Manager, and the Administrative Services Customer Service Manager.
- A sixth group of **traditionally marginalized communities**, including people who are Black, Indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC), people who are LGBTQIA+, and people with disabilities was consulted. It was mutually agreed that the most respectful way to include their voices was to engage specific groups after the community needs assessment and involve them in discussions about implementation.

In addition to summarizing the themes from the discussions, throughout the report we include paraphrased quotes that illustrate key ideas from these focus groups.

What did we find?

The following are key findings from the qualitative and quantitative data collection:

- **Mercer Island is experiencing a shift in its population demographics**, with notable growth in diversity, particularly in the Asian population and individuals identifying with multiple races. This demographic change is reflected in the linguistic diversity of the community, highlighting the **need for tailored programs and language services to engage and serve the growing demographic groups.**

- The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted Mercer Island's sense of community, leading to a **decrease in organic connections and a need for inclusive programs** catering to diverse demographics.
- Involving and inviting community members, especially **youth, marginalized populations, and BIPOC leaders**, in program planning and implementation could help ensure MIYFS offerings **remain relevant and responsive to evolving needs**.
- **Youth mental health emerges as a top priority** and concern within the community, exacerbated by the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and increasing reliance of technology for social connection. **Increased demand for mental health services**, long waitlists, and limited resources have strained existing resources. There is a pressing need for additional counselors, particularly those reflecting the community's growing Asian and multiracial population.
- The shift to remote schooling during the pandemic had **significant effects on students' social and emotional development**, leading to concerns about **decreased social skills and increased reliance on technology**.
- Mercer Island's high-achieving and highly educated community **fosters a culture of academic pressure** and a narrow definition of success, particularly among youth. There is a need for continued conversation and education to expand the definition of success, reduce academic pressure, and support students' mental health and wellbeing beyond academic achievements.
- **Elderly residents on Mercer Island face isolation**, exacerbated by the pandemic and a need for transportation options. There is demand for increased community engagement, outreach efforts, and specialized support programs to address their unique challenges.

Findings

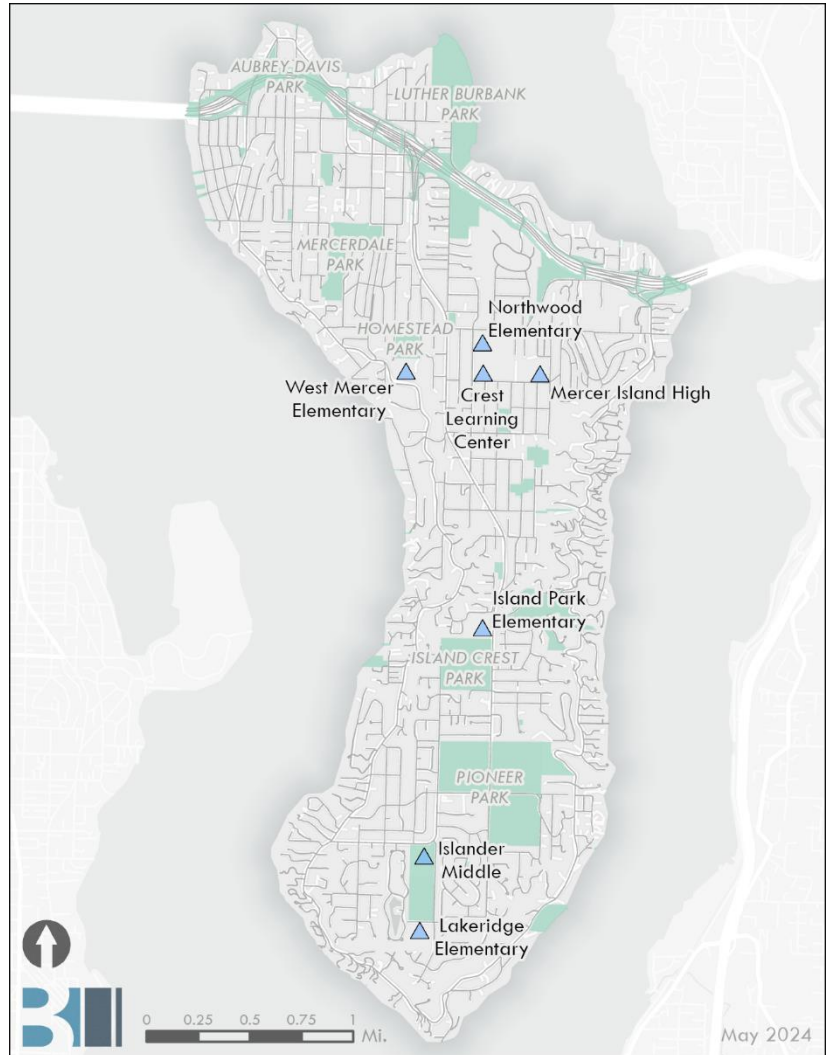
This community needs assessment focused on the City of Mercer Island, Washington and identified major themes and findings related to human services. We categorize findings into the following sections:

- Community Demographics
- Youth Mental Wellbeing
- Drugs and Alcohol
- Parenting
- Community and Connection
- Trends in Older Adults
- Financial Distress

Community Demographics

Mercer Island demographics are changing. Although Mercer Island shows much slower population and housing growth than most comparison cities,¹ it is becoming more diverse with respect to race and ethnicity, languages spoken at home, and age distribution. These demographic changes have a direct impact on service delivery and needs. The slower growth can be attributed in part to the lack of available land for new housing development to add more units.

Map of Mercer Island, including parks and public schools



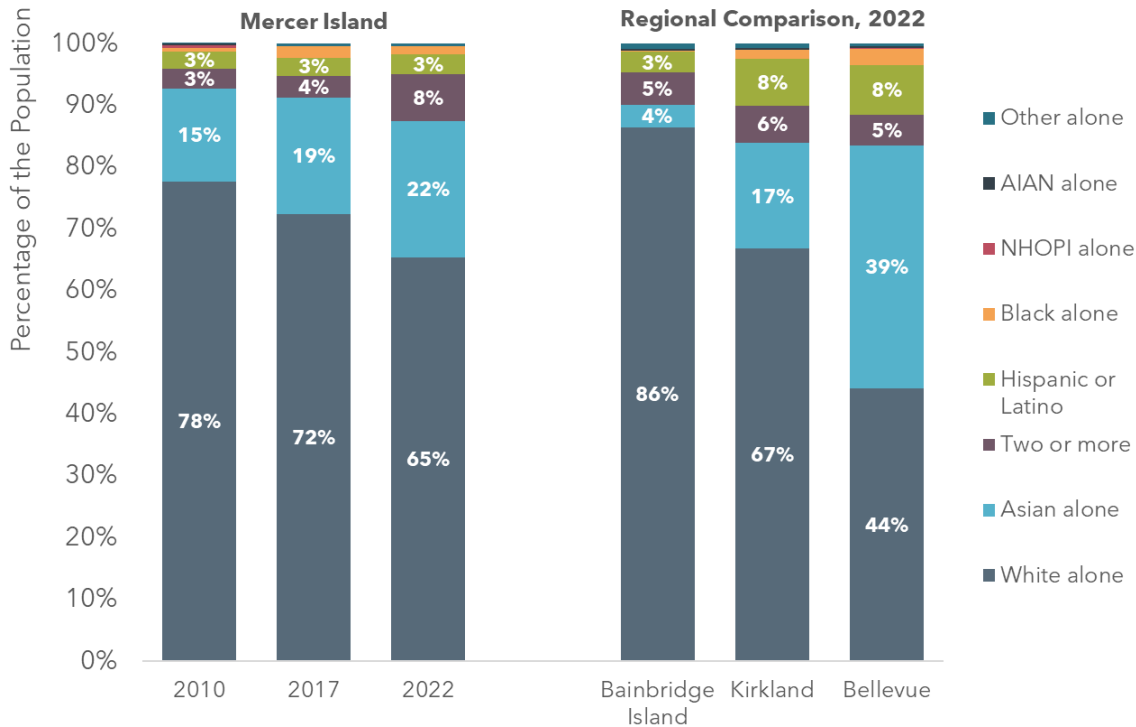
Source: BERK, 2024.

¹ Comparison cities of Bainbridge Island, Bellevue, Issaquah, Kirkland, Redmond, and Sammamish were chosen due to their proximity to Mercer Island, similar socioeconomic characteristics, geographic similarities (i.e., being an island), and/or size.

Race and Ethnicity

Mercer Island is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. The Asian population and people identifying with “two or more” races shows the largest growth as a share of overall population, while the subset of the population that identifies as White alone has decreased from 78% in 2010 to 65% in 2022 (Exhibit 1 and Exhibit 2). As shown in Exhibit 1, Mercer Island is closest to Kirkland in terms of its racial and ethnic composition in 2022.

Exhibit 1. Change in race and ethnicity in Mercer Island from 2010 to 2022, and 2022 comparison to regional cities



Notes: AIAN is American Indian and Alaska Native; NHOPI is Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander.
Sources: ACS 5-year Estimates 2006-2010, 2013-2017, and 2018-2022; BERK, 2024.

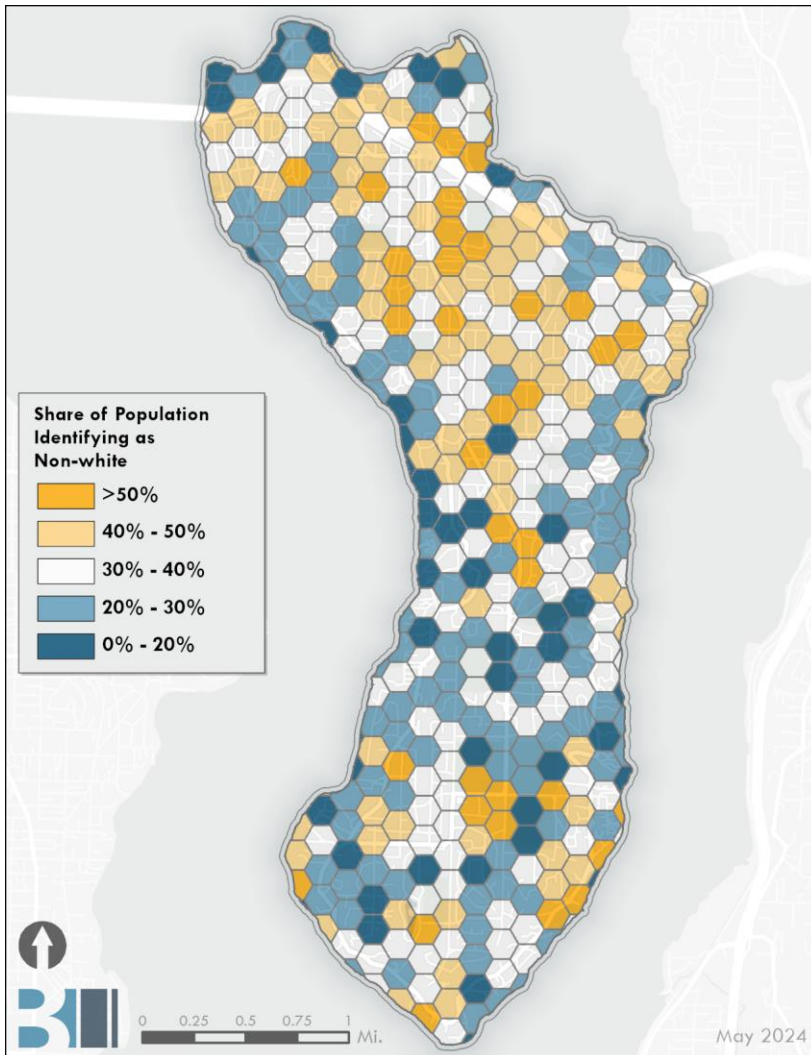
Exhibit 2. Change in race and ethnicity, 2010 to 2022

Mercer Island	2010	2017	2022	Change 2010-2022	Change 2017-2022
Non-Hispanic or Latino					
White alone	78%	72%	65%	-12.2	-7.1
Black alone	1%	2%	1%	+0.6	-0.5
NHOPI alone	0.4%	0.1%	0.0%	-0.4	-0.1
AIAN alone	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	-0.2	0.0
Other alone	0.1%	0.4%	0.5%	+0.4	+0.1
Asian alone	15%	19%	22%	+6.9	+3.2
Two or more	3%	4%	8%	+4.4	+4.1
Hispanic or Latino (of any race)	3%	3%	3%	+0.5	+0.3

Sources: ACS 5-year Estimates 2006-2010, 2013-2017, and 2018-2022; BERK, 2024.

Exhibit 3 shows the share of the population who identifies as a race or ethnicity other than White alone. There are greater concentrations of these community members on the north end of the island.

Exhibit 3. Share of the population identifying as non-White alone across Mercer Island, 2020



Sources: U.S. Decennial Census, 2020; BERK 2024.

The school district reflects the ongoing demographic changes in racial makeup. There has been a notable decline in the White student population, from 72% in 2012-13 to 49% in 2023-24, accompanied by an increase in Asian, multiracial, and Hispanic student populations (see Exhibit 4). Student enrollment overall has declined since the 2012-2013 school year with 367 fewer students.

Exhibit 4. Race and ethnicity of Mercer Island Public School students, 2012 and 2023

	2012-13		2023-24		Change in Enrollment
	Total	Percent	Total	Percent	Total Students
American Indian / Alaskan Native	14	0.3%	4	0.1%	-10
Asian	805	19%	1,092	27%	287
Black or African American	52	1%	40	1%	-12
Hispanic or Latino of any race	156	4%	290	7%	134
Native Hawaiian / Other Pacific	10	0.2%	6	0.2%	-4
Two or more races	200	5%	582	15%	382
White	3,105	72%	1,961	49%	-1,144
Total	4,342		3,975		-367

Sources: WA OSPI, 2012-13 and 2023-24; BERK 2024.

Foreign-Born Population and Languages Spoken

From 2017 to 2022 there was a 36% increase in the foreign-born population. The largest increase was in residents from Asia, with a small increase in those from Europe (Exhibit 5).

Exhibit 5. Foreign-born population, 2017 to 2022

Mercer Island	2017	2022	Change 2017-2022
Total Foreign-Born Population	4,587	6,257	+36%
Africa	6%	1%	-4.6
Asia	55%	63%	+7.9
Europe	18%	20%	+2.2
Latin America	10%	8%	-2.0
Northern America	9%	6%	-3.1
Oceania	2%	2%	-0.4

Sources: ACS 5-year Estimates 2013-201 and 2018-2022; BERK, 2024

As Mercer Island’s population changes, there has been a notable shift in the share of residents speaking only English at home from 81% in 2010 to 76% in 2022. Of those that speak a language other than English at home, there have been increases in the share of those who speak English well or very well (Exhibit 6).

Exhibit 6. Change in English-speaking ability for residents, 2010 to 2022

Mercer Island	2010	2017	2022	Change 2010-2022	Change 2017-2022
Only English	81%	82%	76%	-5.4	-6.4
Very well	14%	13%	16%	+2.1	+3.5
Well	3%	2%	4%	+1.2	+1.7
Not well	1%	1%	3%	+1.5	+1.3
Not at all	0%	1%	1%	+0.5	-0.1

Note: The Census asks whether people speak only English at home and then of those who speak another language, it goes on to ask how well they speak English.

Sources: ACS 5-year Estimates 2006-2010, 2013-2017, and 2018-2022; BERK, 2024.

The share of students who only spoke English decreased by 675 students between 2019 and 2023, while the share of students who spoke Mandarin increased by around 85 students since 2019 (Exhibit 7).

Exhibit 7. Top 20 Public School student languages spoken at home, 2019 to 2023

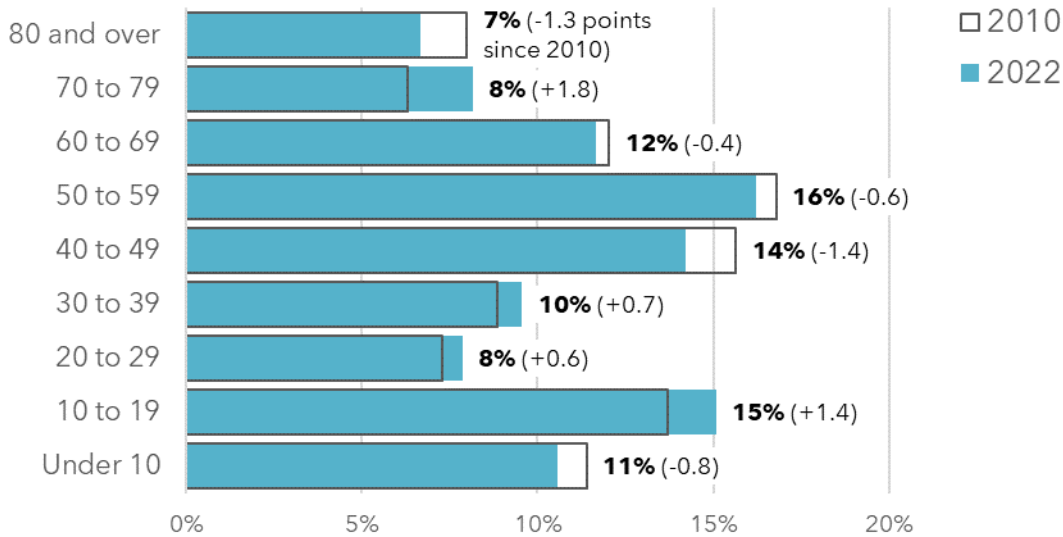
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Change 2019-2023
English	4169	4038	3813	3647	3494	-675
Chinese-Unspecified	168	162	145	131	130	-38
Chinese-Mandarin	58	86	93	111	143	85
Korean	53	56	45	41	44	-9
Russian	38	36	36	39	34	-4
Spanish	37	45	46	35	41	4
Japanese	24	25	25	24	29	5
French	24	26	20	18	16	-8
Vietnamese	20	27	27	32	25	5
Chinese-Cantonese	16	15	18	13	23	7
Chin	14	11	5	4	4	-10
Dutch	14	10	9	8	6	-8
Polish	7	5	5	3	6	-1
Hebrew, Modern	7	8	9	11	12	5
Italian	7	5	6	5	9	2
Tamil	6	4	5	5	6	0
Punjabi	5	5	5	6	8	3
German	5	4	5	6	6	1
Farsi	5	4	4	4	6	1
Turkish	4	4	3	3	4	0

Sources: WA OSPI, 2024; BERK 2024

Age Distribution

Overall age distribution patterns suggest some growth in Island residents aged 10 to 19, 30 to 39, and 70 to 79 (the Boomer Generation) between 2010 to 2022, along with small decreases in those aged 40 to 69 as the Boomers have aged and Generation X coming behind is a smaller cohort (Exhibit 8).

Exhibit 8. Change in age distribution, 2010 to 2022



Sources: ACS 5-year Estimates 2006-2010 and 2018-2022; BERK, 2024.

Youth Sexual Orientation

The Washington State Healthy Youth Survey of 8th, 10th, and 12th graders found that 39% of Mercer Island 12th graders self-identified with a sexual orientation other than heterosexual.

Exhibit 9. Student sexual orientation by percentage by grade level, 2023

Sexual Orientation	Grade 8	Grade 10	Grade 12
Heterosexual/straight	78%	77%	70%
Bisexual	8%	12%	18%
Something else fits better	6%	4%	8%
Questioning/Not sure	6%	4%	7%
Gay or lesbian	5%	5%	6%
I do not know what the question is asking	7%	3%	2%

Note: These are not mutually exclusive categories and thus do not sum to 100%.

Sources: Washington State Healthy Youth Survey, 2023; BERK, 2024.

The demographic shifts in Mercer Island manifest across schools, senior populations, and the broader community. Effectively addressing and reaching these residents requires deliberate initiatives to engage immigrant populations, Asian families, and young families through tailored programming and collaborative partnerships. This approach recognizes

that traditional approaches are insufficient and require intentional strategies to meet evolving needs.

During focus group discussions, participants emphasized the crucial role played by staff that reflect the community or are proficient in the languages spoken by clients. Such staff can identify gaps and needs that might otherwise go unnoticed. For instance, a current MIYFS staff member who is fluent in four languages has proven invaluable in bridging cultural gaps and connecting with clients on a deeper level. Their ability to navigate different cultural contexts and effectively communicate with clients has shed light on previously overlooked needs within the community, enhancing MIYFS' understanding and presence on the island.

Needs expressed by the community

Focus groups discussed ways to address the shifting needs of MIYFS service delivery. Suggestions and observations include:

- Tailor programs and intentional efforts to engage and reach growing demographic groups through:
 - Language services and resources.
 - Partnerships with special interest groups.
 - Systemic community building and connections.
- Ensure direct service staff, including MIYFS counselors, reflect the community.
- Increase affinity groups in the community.
- Support and coordinate efforts to bring together people who are facing similar issues.
- Reestablish the MIYFS Youth Advisory Board.
- Offer preschool and school-age parenting programming (offered in language) that addresses the unique experience and dichotomy of immigrant parenthood, such as raising children in the US while preserving cultural heritage.
- The limited number of preschools and financial scholarships from the Mercer Island Preschool Association result in ongoing requests for additional preschool programming, with annual demand outpacing supply.

Youth Mental Wellbeing

The “youth mental health crisis” identified by the U.S. Surgeon General existed before the pandemic. There has been an increase in the number of youth meeting the criteria for anxiety and depressive disorders, and the median age of those expressing suicidal ideation has fallen into the elementary school years.

Depression and Suicidal Ideation

When MIYFS staff during a focus group were asked to identify current and highest perceived needs, all staff expressed that youth mental health was a top priority and need. School-aged mental health, specifically anxiety and depression, was exacerbated and

surfaced in earlier ages due to the pandemic and impact of remote school. Though there was high demand for mental health counseling prior to the pandemic, the YFS outpatient waitlist grew significantly after the COVID-19 pandemic. Post-COVID, the frequency of pediatric anxiety diagnoses has increased, and seniors continue to face additional isolation and related stressors.

Although focus group participants noted that there is less stigma around anxiety and depression and seeking help from professionals than in the past, there is now higher demand for mental health services at all levels. This is an area where MIYFS already plays a significant role. However, due to higher demand, long waitlists, and current counselors already at-capacity, Mercer Island would benefit from more resources related to youth mental health.

“Needs are high and there are not enough of us [elementary, middle and high school therapists and outpatient therapists] to go around.” - MIYFS counselor

“There is too much demand at elementary school because there are fewer clinicians. It feels useless and difficult to refer kids elsewhere. Many do not take a waitlist, or I am referring people to somewhere they will be waiting 9 months.” - MIYFS counselor

“The demand pre-pandemic was high, but the pandemic spiked everything.” - MIYFS staff

“It is hard to turn kids away, so you end up spreading yourself so thin. The clinician is less effective because we are pulled in so many directions. I feel stuck in triage mode.” - MIYFS counselor

“Schools aren’t equipped to help with mental health needs.” - MIYFS counselor

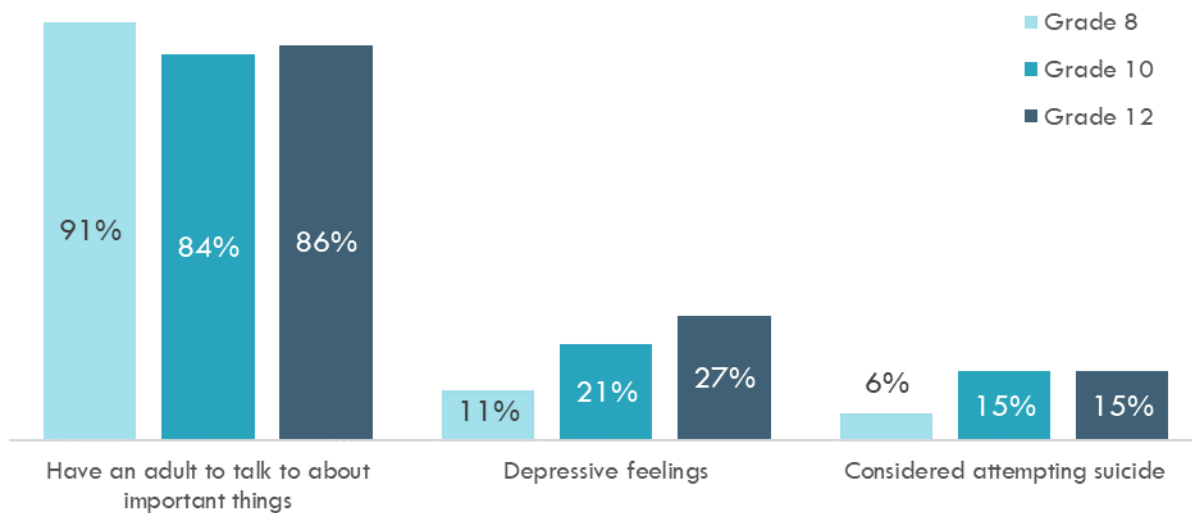
Mercer Island High School students highlighted isolation, stunting of social skills, and depression as key factors during the pandemic and remote school. Seven out of eleven students from the focus group expressed that the pandemic negatively impacted their mental health during that period.

“Socializing with people online is way different than making friends in person. The pandemic stunted my social skills. It was a setback.” - Mercer Island High School student

“The pandemic happened during a formative time. Depression from isolation is a big problem.” - Mercer Island High School student

A few high school students from the focus group reported that many students are struggling with mental health issues, but they pass through the school system without teachers and adults reaching out and connecting them to resources if they present as high functioning. The Washington State Healthy Youth Survey of 8th, 10th, and 12th graders found that 84% to 91% of Mercer Island students report having an adult they can talk to about “important things,” rates that are well above the state average (Exhibit 10).² On average, Mercer Island students continue to have lower rates of depression than peers statewide, and the rate of students reporting depressive feelings has held relatively stable since 2006 (Exhibit 11). However, depression rates increase significantly between 8th and 12th grade, and 15% of 10th and 12th graders have considered attempting suicide (Exhibit 10). While rates of contemplation of suicide are comparable to statewide averages, these rates have trended upward since 2006. (Exhibit 11).

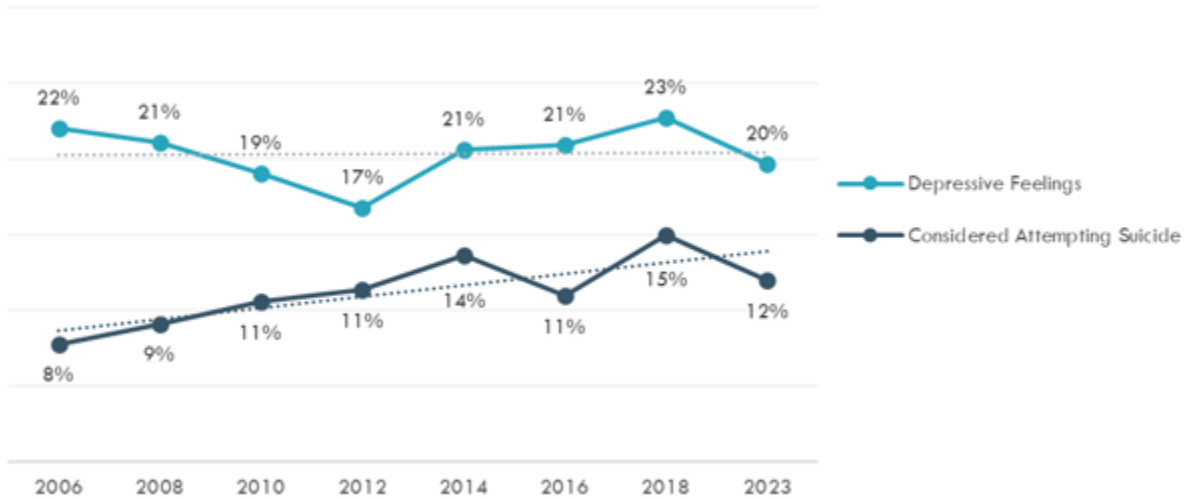
Exhibit 10. Percent of Mercer Island students who have an adult to talk to, have depressive feelings, or have suicidal thoughts during the last 12 months, by grade level, 2023



Sources: Washington State Healthy Youth Survey, 2023; BERK, 2024.

² Exhibits in this report focus on Mercer Island with narrative comparisons to the state overall. Full results, including historical data for Washington State overall, can be accessed at <https://www.askhys.net/>

Exhibit 11. Change in the percent of Mercer Island students reporting depressive feelings or suicidal thoughts during the last 12 months, 2006 to 2023

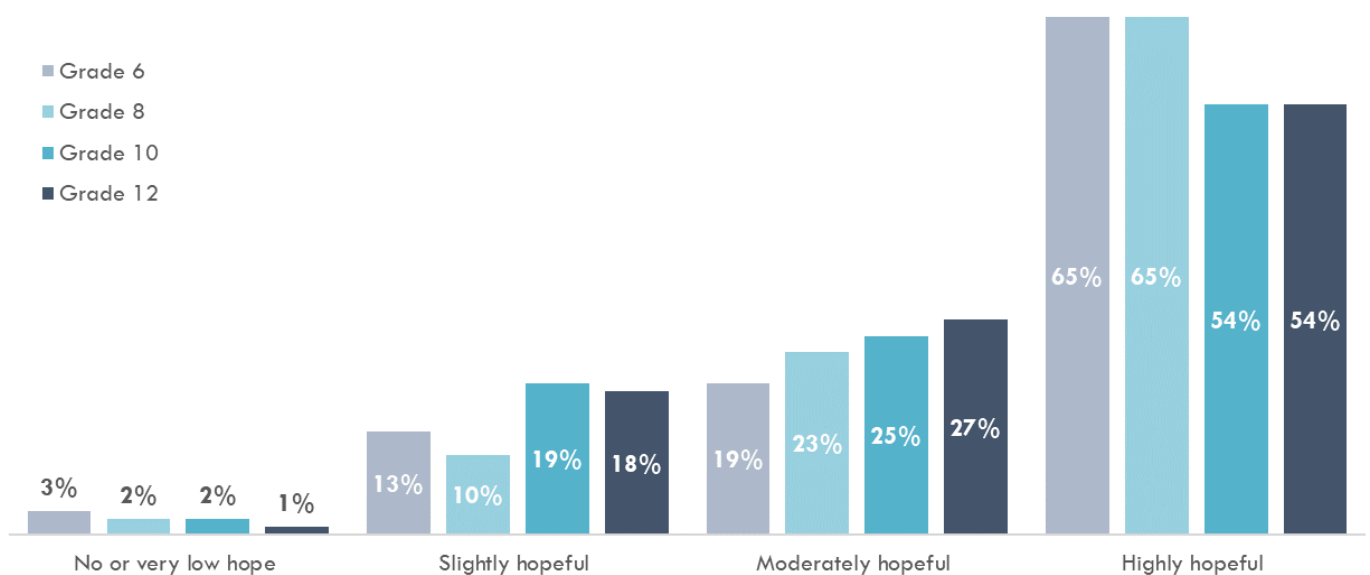


Sources: Washington State Healthy Youth Survey, 2006 through 2023; BERK, 2024.

Although the Healthy Youth Survey does not report on elementary school students, focus group participants reported behaviors such as suicide ideation and self-harm that are typically seen in middle or high school ages are now seen in younger elementary aged kids.

Counselors, teachers, and therapists reported that Mercer Island kids seem less hopeful than they used to be, with worries of climate change and societal problems. However, the Healthy Youth Survey indicates that Mercer Island youth still express more hope compared to statewide peers, with Mercer Island students scoring 10% to 20% higher on the highly hopeful scale.

Exhibit 12. Percent of students reporting feeling hopeful, by grade level, 2023



Sources: Washington State Healthy Youth Survey, 2023; BERK, 2024.

While mental and behavioral health needs are increasing across the community, access to therapy is a challenge. Many therapists on the island do not accept private insurance, let alone Medicaid, so many residents pay for services out-of-pocket. Notably, MIYFS offers a sliding fee scale for all residents and services are provided in the schools at no charge.

Increased demand for mental health services is impacting counselors and clinicians. Many describe themselves as in “triage mode,” spread thin across more patients. And many note the current pay structure is not competitive, leading many clinicians to leave for private practice and contributing to retention issues.

Needs expressed by the community

Youth mental health continues to be a pressing need. Suggestions and observations include:

- Add more YFS counselors in schools and in the community to meet demand. Specifically, counselors that reflect the community and changing demographics.
- Provide additional support at the elementary schools due to increased needs. There is not enough time for one counselor to do it all.
- Add after-school appointments and resources, as many parents prefer not to take their kids out of school.
- Adjust salary and pay structure of clinicians and counselors to be competitive and address issues of retention.
- Provide in-school targeted programs for mental health as an alternative to talk therapy in middle and elementary school age groups. This would allow teachers and staff to follow programming and create opportunities for students to express how they are feeling and intervene if needed.
- Cross-train academic counselors on mental health support and confidentiality.
- Provide sexual health education for youth.
- Address high levels of binge drinking among youth. Suggestions from parents included family or parent limit setting, monitoring parties, adult role modeling, enforcement of the MI Underage Drinking Ordinance.
- Bring back the in-house court diversion program for minors that allowed YFS staff to work directly with students who got in trouble at school through a structured, timely program.
- Reestablish MIYFS Youth Advisory Board, VOICE (Volunteer Outreach In Communities Everywhere) middle and high school service-learning program, SVP (Summer Volunteer Program), or another youth-oriented program to create meaningful connection and voice for youth.
- Connect youth with seniors.
- Grant funding for The Incredible Years program for preschool and early elementary age children expires this year.

Impacts of Remote School

The COVID-19 pandemic produced a seismic shift in education, with the widespread adoption of remote school. Mercer Island School District was remote for a good portion of the pandemic. This adjustment profoundly impacted students, including:

- **The stunting of social and emotional skills** (e.g., problem solving skills, coping skills) during formative times, as reduced opportunities for in-person interaction hindered students' ability to develop and maintain social interactions.
- **Unstructured learning environments.** Both students and adults reflected on youth having too much freedom, independence, and autonomy too soon. The lack of structured learning environments and external motivators also meant that some students did not develop effective study habits, which impeded their ability to manage their time effectively.
- **Decreased attention spans.** Furthermore, many students experienced decreased attention spans during classes and assignments, possibly due to the challenges of engaging with material in a remote setting.

While many impacts were negative, it is worth noting that for some students, the freedom and boredom of remote learning sparked creativity that may not have been encouraged in a traditional school setting.

"I learned to be self-sufficient. I didn't have a ton of friends, and this resulted in me not being outgoing or taking steps to hang out outside of school only once a month."
- Mercer Island High School student

"I hated online school. There were no external motivators, and with ADHD, executive function, and depressive episodes, it affected me a lot. I was expected to just be normal and do schoolwork like nothing was happening." - Mercer Island High School student

"I had the energy and time to do art projects and building projects that spawned out of boredom." - Mercer Island High School student

Social Media and Technology

The increase in social media and technology usage over the past few decades has had a profound impact on students, with notable effects on social skills, engagement, isolation, self-worth, and anxiety. With screens being normalized during the pandemic, many focus group participants reported that the pandemic increased social media usage. During the pandemic, many parents struggled to manage and regulate their children's technology use, and many experienced anxieties surrounding its impact. (For more information on the parent perspective and needs around technology, see the Parenting section).

Some parents report the school district's abrupt change back to in-person learning was difficult for youth and that some teachers have retained online learning strategies that some

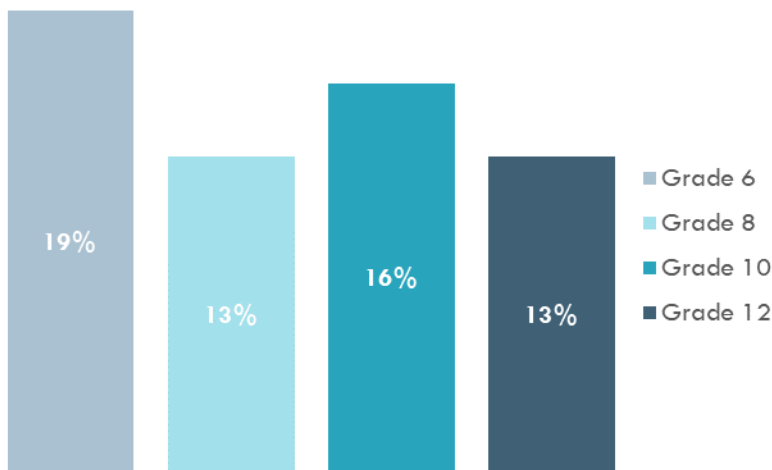
parents question. Additionally, social media platforms (such as Nextdoor) have been identified as contributing to issues of online bullying among adults and youth, leading to a decline in the sense of community trust.

“Social media has been really unhealthy. It totally eroded our community’s sense of trust in each other. It’s easy to say toxic things online and not having to own it.” - Parent

“The pandemic created independence and freedom that was too soon [for kids]. They were left to devices.” -MIYFS Staff

According to the Healthy Youth Survey, reported rates of bullying are lower in Mercer Island compared to statewide averages (Exhibit 13). Bullying rates are significantly lower than the state averages in 6th grade (14% lower) and 8th grade (15% lower), with these differences leveling out by 10th and 12th grade. Notably, based on the question phrasing, students likely include online and cyber bullying in their responses, underscoring the importance of understanding the source of bullying, particularly given the vulnerability of post-pandemic youth to social media influence.

Exhibit 13. Percent of students reporting bullying within the last 30 days, 2023



Note: Bullying in this survey is defined as follows: “One or more students threaten, spread rumors about, hit, shove, or otherwise hurt another student over and over again. It is not bullying when two students of about the same strength or power argue or fight or tease each other in a friendly way.”

Sources: Washington State Healthy Youth Survey, 2023; BERK, 2024.

Needs expressed by the community

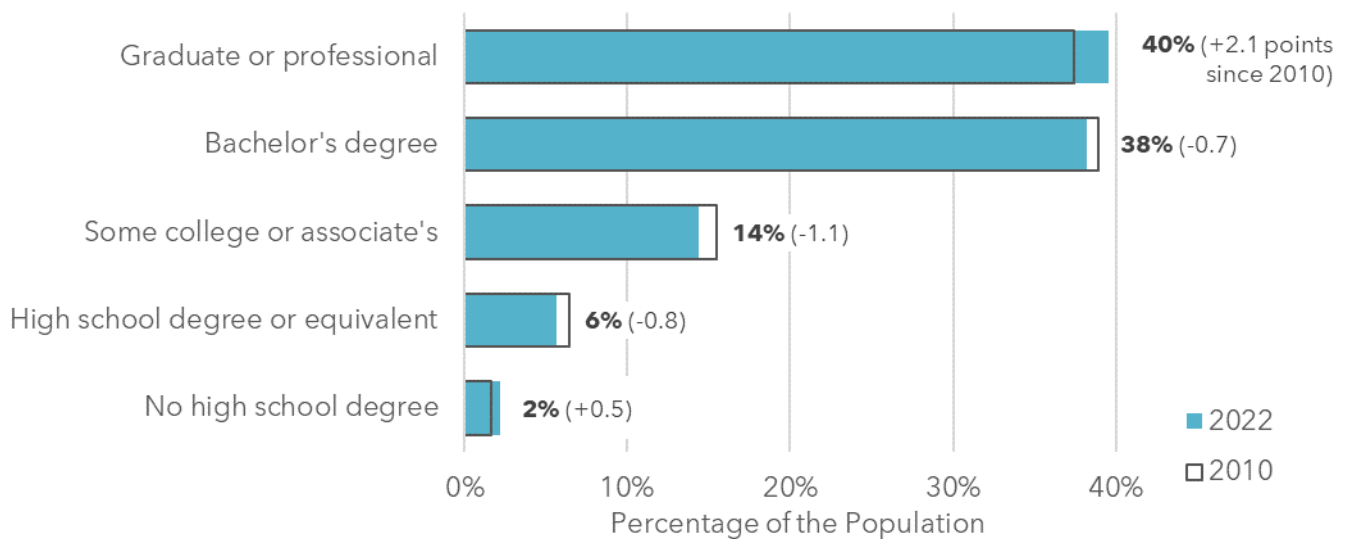
The pandemic led to increased social media usage with notable negative impacts to the Mercer Island community. Needs expressed by the community through focus groups include:

- School administrators noted a need for technology restrictions within schools as students find it challenging to disengage from technology and fully engage in learning.
- Many parents struggle to manage and regulate their children's technology use, experiencing anxiety surrounding its impact.
- There is a need for continued education around:
 - the impact of social media bullying for all ages, including parents, adults, and youth.
 - social media addiction and its harms on mental health, isolation, and building community strategies to decrease social media usage.

Perception of Success

Adults in Mercer Island have remarkably high rates of educational attainment. A very small percentage of the population has less than a high school degree or equivalent, while most residents hold either bachelor's degrees or graduate/professional degrees. Notably, there has been an increase in the attainment of graduate or professional degrees between 2017 and 2022 (Exhibit 14).

Exhibit 14. Change in educational attainment, 2010-2022



Sources: ACS 5-year Estimates 2006-2010 and 2018-2022; BERK, 2024.

Focus groups participants reflected on the pressure to excel in a high-achieving, highly educated, and affluent community. Within the educational context, this manifests in pressure for youth to be admitted into prestigious colleges, competition with peers, and comparing oneself academically. When the high school focus group participants were asked what it's like to be a Mercer Island high school student in 2024, many responses focused on the pressure to excel and be successful.

“Mercer Island has a narrow idea of what you need to do to be successful. It is a narrow definition of success and a very narrow mindset of what you must do to be considered smart.” - Mercer Island High School student

“There is pressure to get into a top 10 school or Ivy League. People push themselves to do all APs [advanced placement] classes and do extracurriculars. There is always going to be someone who does more than you.” - Mercer Island High School student

“There are hundreds of people doing the same thing as you but better. I always feel inferior and like I need to catch up.” - Mercer Island High School student

“There is pressure to take rigorous courses. You completely disregard your mental health for academic excellence.” - Mercer Island High School student

*“It is constantly balancing societal expectations for your future.”
- Mercer Island High School student*

When high school students were asked about the source of academic pressure, all participants identified self-imposed pressure reinforced by the perception that peers support a “do whatever it takes” approach to academic achievement. Half of the participants also mentioned parental pressure. Many students spoke about how the pursuit of academic excellence exacts a significant toll on their mental health.

The Washington State Healthy Youth Survey revealed that Mercer Island students fare better in several key areas compared to their peers statewide. For 8th graders, the survey found a 16% higher rate of feeling safe and a 7% higher rate of school enjoyment. Additionally, Mercer Island 8th graders have a 12% lower rate of skipping school and a 15% lower rate of experiencing bullying.

Needs expressed by the community

The specific and narrow definition of success was a recurring theme throughout focus group conversations. Suggestions and observations to expand this narrative of success include:

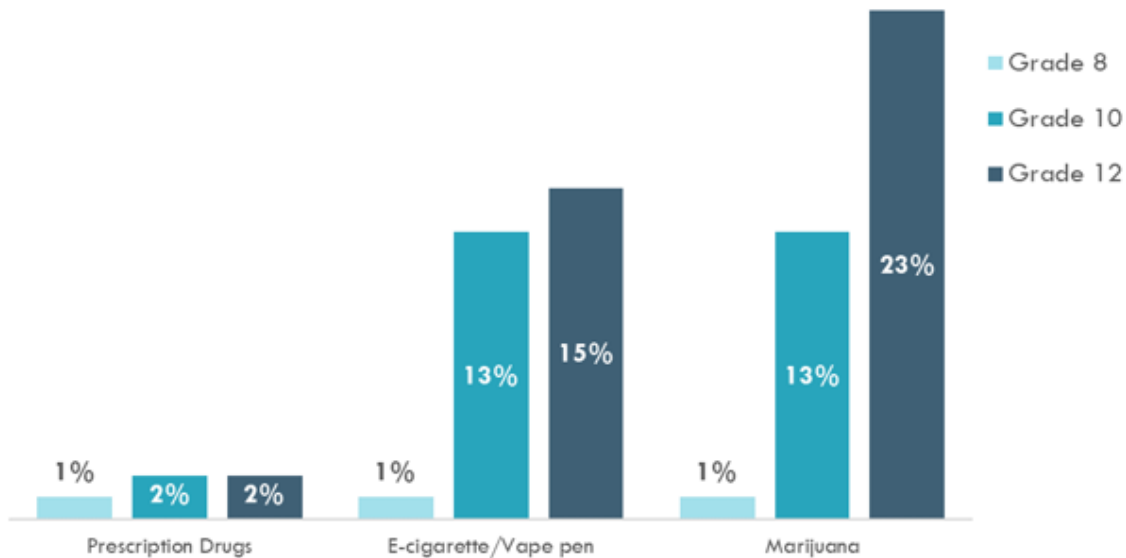
- Continue conversations and education around expanding the definition of success for youth and parents.
- Work with MISD to educate parents about who should take AP classes, the role of AP, and long-term benefits and tradeoffs of these courses.
- Criticism of HiCap (highly capable) type programs due to the worth and effort put into some students over others early on, sets a trajectory that jeopardizes self-worth.

Drugs and Alcohol

Youth

Counselors and MIYFS staff underscored the prevalence of there being a “work hard, play hard” mentality among youth and parents on the island. They observed that although students may excel academically, there are also concerns regarding unhealthy coping mechanisms. These coping strategies often involve the use of alcohol (binge drinking in particular), marijuana, and nicotine (vape). The Healthy Youth Survey (See Exhibit 15) highlights these concerns, showing rates of marijuana and e-cigarette/ vape pen use among 12th graders at 23% and 15% respectively.

Exhibit 15. Percent of students reporting substance use within the last 30 days, 2023

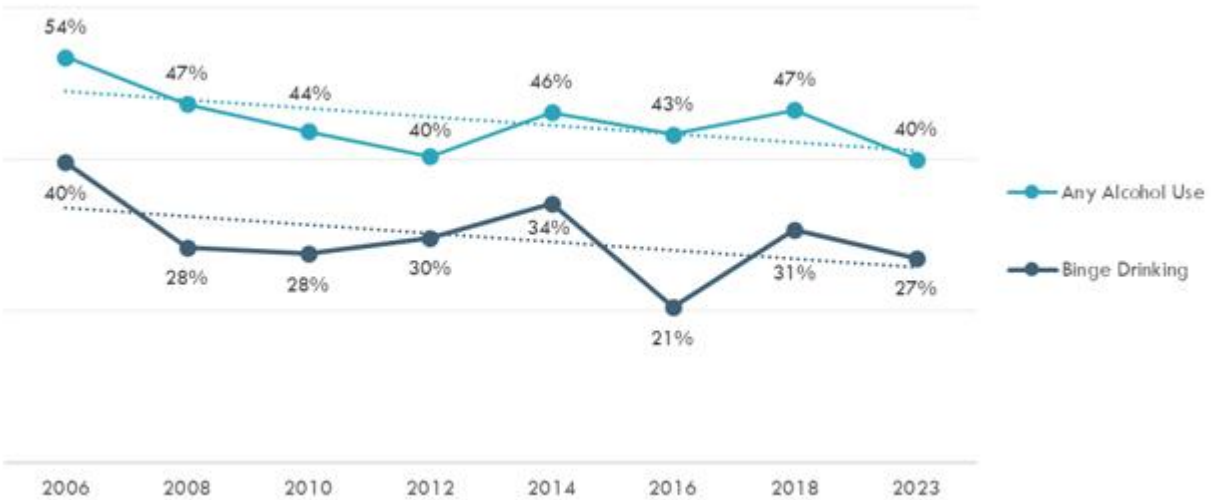


Note: Prescription drug use refers to use of prescription drugs without a prescription.

Sources: Washington State Healthy Youth Survey, 2023; BERK, 2024.

Mercer Island youth use alcohol, binge drink (which is defined as more than five drinks in one occurrence), use marijuana, and use e-cigarettes/vape at higher rates than peers statewide. Notably, however, there has been a decreasing trend in Mercer Island student alcohol and binge drinking since 2006 (Exhibit 16).

Exhibit 16. Change in the percent of students reporting any alcohol use or binge drinking in the last 30 days, 2006 to 2023



Sources: Washington State Healthy Youth Survey, 2006-2023; BERK, 2024

Adults

Mercer Island first responders noted a need for counselors for the adult population to address issues of substance use, abuse, and addiction. While high schools have a drug and alcohol specialist role, first responders want to see this service benefit the broader population. They also discussed the need for a drug treatment facility or increased capacity for intensive treatment services on the island, given the lack of resources regionally

Needs expressed by the community

The following are observations from parents and youth that participated in the focus groups:

- There are high levels of binge drinking among youth.
- Desire to focus on fentanyl prevention efforts despite a low to zero number of Island youth reporting use due to potential lethality.
- Interest in the concept of a Youth Board to create meaningful connection and voice for youth.
- The Healthy Youth Survey highlighted high rates of 8th and 10th graders riding with impaired drivers. Parents and youth suggest these numbers may stem from parents driving while impaired, emphasizing the need for broader conversations and preventive measures.
- A drug treatment facility and/or increased capacity for intensive treatment services on the island are needed.

Parenting

Many parents report experiencing burnout and high levels of stress. These symptoms were exacerbated during the pandemic when children were at home, and many were concerned about their elderly parents.

In response to growing needs and with support from federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services (SAMHSA) grants, funding has been dedicated to supporting parenting classes. Separately, the Mercer Island Parent Edge, a program of Mercer Island PTA Council, partnered with The Parent Venture, a nonprofit organization, to offer online parenting webinars available both live and as recordings. In a survey administered by MI Parent Edge, the majority of parents who participated in the webinars reported watching the recordings, indicating a preference for flexible participation options. There is also support for including in-person speakers (with recordings available), preferably on weekday evenings.

The changing demographics of Mercer Island coupled with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children are reshaping the needs and resources sought by parents. One common challenge faced by parents is the establishment of boundaries and structure for their children, particularly in the aftermath of the pandemic when established norms were upended. Additionally, there is growing demand for culturally relevant resources and classes aimed at equipping immigrant parents with the necessary tools to navigate societal expectations and demands of life in the US.

The Mercer Island Parent Edge survey, distributed in Spring 2024 to parents of preschool, middle, and high school parents (total of 45 respondents), found that the biggest parenting challenge is managing children's use of electronic devices. This includes limiting screen time and navigating the pressure to allow social media apps from a young age.

Needs expressed by the community

In response to parenting stress and demographic changes, suggestions and observations from focus groups and the MI Parent Edge Survey for parent resources include:

- A consistent and growing need and demand for parenting classes and training, with a specific focus on Mandarin and other language options.
- Culturally relevant parenting classes for immigrant and non-White families that address the dichotomy of parenting at home and outside of the home (e.g., raising kids in the US while retaining cultural values from their own backgrounds).
- Anxiety support group and education for parents of elementary-aged children, leveraging Seattle Children’s Hospital’s First Approach Skills Training (FAST) program for anxiety.
- Top parenting topics of interest from the Parent Edge Survey:
 - Technology and digital lives
 - Social and emotional skills
 - Mental health
 - Child development and behavioral health
 - Study skills and executive function

Community and Connection

The pandemic had a significant impact on the sense of belonging and connection that many Mercer Island residents of all ages and backgrounds relied on for community and identity. Loneliness and isolation, which became more prevalent during the pandemic, are recognized as public health concerns with profound effects on physical health. These conditions can increase the risk of heart disease by 29%, stroke risk by 32% and dementia risk by 50%.³ Additionally, a lack of social connection and interaction raises the risk of premature death by more than 60%, comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes per day.⁴

During focus groups, many of the parents, teachers, seniors, and community members felt that the pandemic affected Mercer Island’s strong sense of community. The community experienced a breakdown in longstanding community organizations, events, and opportunities for connection, and these resources have not yet returned in full force.

³ “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community,” (2023).

⁴ Ibid.

*“Many of the programs that were long-standing in the community are gone now. The sense of community that I grew up with here in Mercer Island has felt stunted since COVID.”
- Parent*

*“As a community we need opportunities to organically connect. Social in-person support and safe fun places for kids and adults are things we are lacking as a community.”
- Parent*

Examples of events that were halted and have not returned include MIYFS SVP, VOICE, and the loss of many senior social programs such as Senior Social and pen pals program with seniors and schools. In the absence of these events, the opportunity for organic connections has decreased significantly.

Some noted that the programs and events that have returned are successful due to their being inclusive and inviting of many different languages and cultures. They also noted that scheduling is more appropriate for working parents. These considerations should be central as MIYFS staff think about program gaps and needs.

As Mercer Island’s demographics shift toward an increase of new younger families, immigrants, and Asian residents, there has been a noticeable increase of affinity groups formed by and for these populations. Despite MIYFS’s capacity constraints, MIYFS Parks and Recreation staff expressed keen interest in sustaining and expanding partnerships with affinity groups, as more groups are coming to them to collaborate on events and get access to Park resources. Meanwhile, MI Parent Edge is exploring the idea of establishing family ambassadors at each school to connect with new families while also ensuring student ambassadors welcome new students. These collaborative programs and initiatives hold promise in counteracting the entrenched sense of long-standing residency on Mercer Island, which can sometimes pose challenges for newcomers including families and youth seeking to connect and feel a sense of belonging in the community.

“The demographics of Mercer Island have changed a lot. How many of us have reached out to the new people and people that look different than you to invite them to these groups and programs? We have ourselves to blame for the lack of volunteers.” - Parent

“Trying to integrate into Mercer Island can be tricky because people are proud of how long they have lived on Mercer Island.” - MIYFS Staff

*“Seeing more culturally-based interest groups is a great reflection of the community.”
- MIYFS Staff*

Some focus group participants believe there is insufficient communication to inform residents about where to find services, resources, events, and programming. MIYFS staff have found it difficult to get information out to the community, as turnout for community Town Halls, presentations, and events designed to share information remains consistently low.

Needs expressed by the community

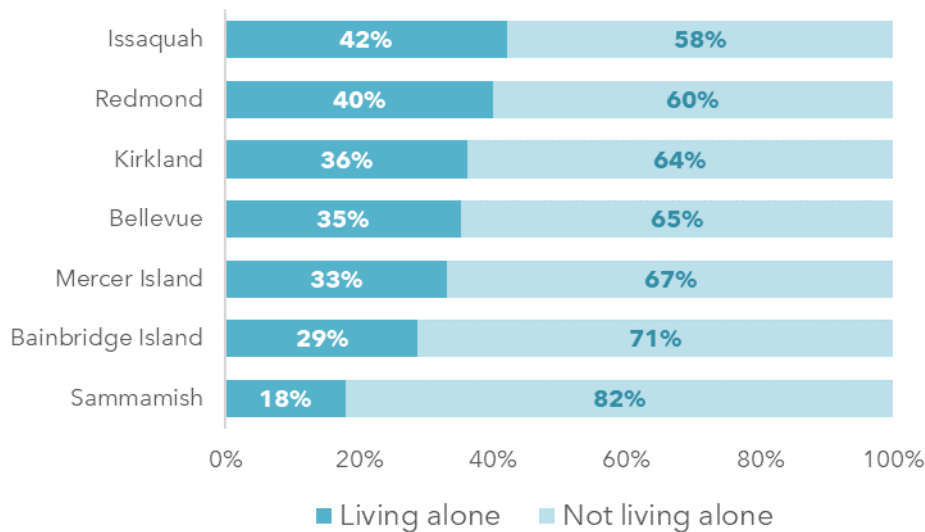
Community and connection are a large part of living on Mercer Island, but with many programs and events canceled during the pandemic, the following ideas to increase community connection were suggested:

- Bring back programs and events (that were halted due to the pandemic) that encourage organic connections and create community.
 - MIYFS staff have observed a trend where parents and community members register for programs but fail to attend, despite indicating interest. This phenomenon has become more pronounced post-pandemic.
- Create orientations and welcome committees for families and youth that are new to the community.
 - Create a web page for new residents
- Make programs and events inclusive and more reflective of the population of Mercer Island.
- Build partnerships, help establish, and elevate the work of affinity groups that support the changing demographics such as new younger families, immigrant populations, Asian populations, and seniors.
- Support and coordinate efforts to bring people together who face similar issues including seniors who have dementia, people living with substance abuse disorder, caregivers, Chinese immigrant parents, etc.
- Improve communication and ways to share information about resources, events, and community building.
- Create a list of parents and families willing to be contacted as a resource for mental health diagnoses, first time experiencing something, and families transferring into the school district.

Trends in Older Adults

Older adults continue to be a large share of the Mercer Island population. As shown in Exhibit 8, 27% of the population was 60 years or older in 2022. Looking at the population 65 and older, 33% of them live alone in Mercer Island, which is similar to most of the comparison jurisdictions though the share is lower in Sammamish and higher in Issaquah.

Exhibit 17. Households with a person 65 Years or older, living alone versus not living alone, Mercer Island and comparison cities, 2022



Sources: ACS 5-year Estimates 2018-2022; BERK, 2024.

In focus groups and in conversations with MIYFS staff, many older adults talked about the guilt and shame that comes with a loss of income and loss of capability.

“There is a predominant narrative (most often seen in older White individuals) of: ‘I am going to still be independent and accessing help is a failure.’” - MIYFS Staff

Isolation and lack of connection was a recurring theme and concern including:

- **Limited transportation.** The island is not always walkable due to hills and lack of sidewalks. With limited public transportation, there are limited avenues for older adults to do everyday things let alone attend social events.
- **Limited participation in programs and events.** There was a notable reduction in programs and events during the pandemic, many of which have not resumed, likely leading to more isolation and fewer opportunities for seniors to connect with each other. However, it is important to recognize that many of the senior events were not well-attended prior to the pandemic, and the introduction of new senior offerings has not generated a lot of interest.

- **Mental health concerns.** Mental health issues, specifically anxiety, depression, grief, and memory loss, are prevalent. There is less stigma around therapy than there was prior to the pandemic, but many people that could benefit from it are still resistant or not interested.

“Not only do we get seniors wanting more resources and opportunities for connection, but the adult children also want resources for their aging parents.” - MIYFS staff

Language and culture are important considerations in understanding older adult experiences in Mercer Island. With the changing demographics of Mercer Island, there has been an increase in older adult residents that move to the United States from other countries with their adult children. The needs and barriers of these older adults vary. Currently, communities of older Jewish residents and some communities of older Chinese residents exhibit a strong sense of community and mutual support, often relying on their internal networks rather than external resources like MIYFS.

“In the Asian community, there is a strong sense of community, and mutual support bringing food and helping each other with daily tasks, that we don’t often see in predominately White older community.” - MIYFS Staff

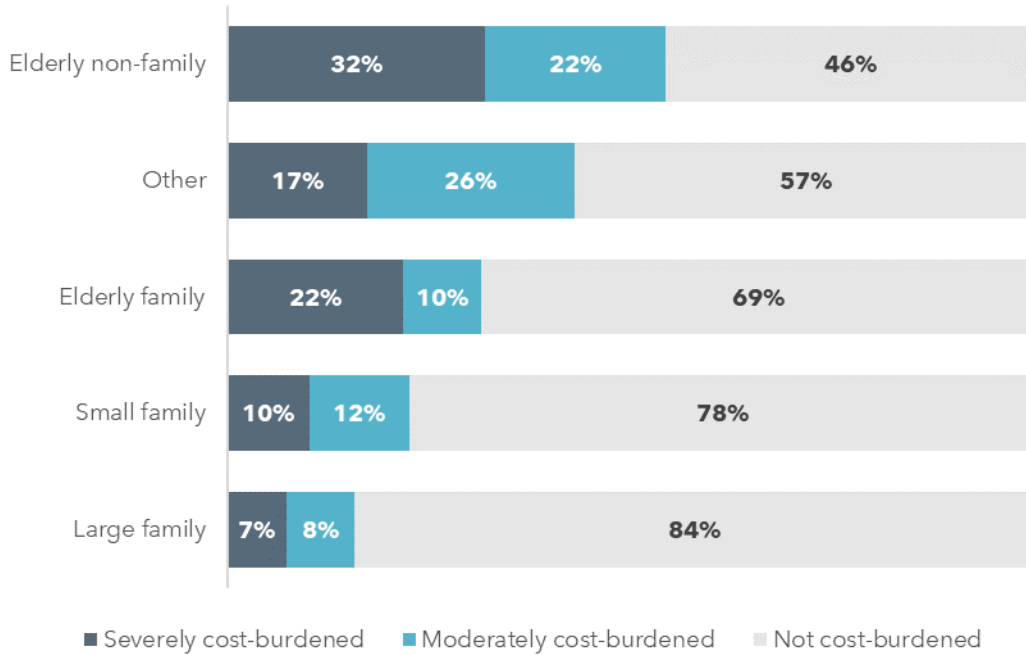
However, despite the cohesion of the older Chinese resident community, there is an expressed need from Chinese adult parents for resources in Mandarin for their older adult parents, as existing resources are inaccessible due to language barriers. These residents recommend that programs and outreach be well grounded in the experiences and needs of these older adults, addressing barriers to access, including limited English proficiency.

Financial distress is another concern among the older adult community, especially related to aging in place. Many older adults have fixed incomes and struggle with inflation and rising prices. Some older adults with low incomes do not know which programs are offered or whether they are eligible. Seniors who own their homes, even without a mortgage, may nonetheless struggle with property taxes, utility bills, and other costs that leave little money for other costs of living or unexpected expenses. Many of the home repair programs that support seniors do not cover the Island based on geography.

Exhibit 18 shows that elderly families are more likely to be moderately and severely cost-burdened than other family types. Moderately cost-burdened means that a household devotes 30% to 49% of its income to housing (i.e., rent and utilities), while severely cost-burdened means that a family devotes 50% or more of its income to housing. Elderly non-families (i.e., unrelated elderly people living together, or elderly people living alone) are the most likely to be cost-burdened.

Many seniors may remain in their homes due to the difficulty finding other options. There are currently only two senior living places on the island which have long waitlists and the affordable housing units have an eight-year waitlist.

Exhibit 18. Housing cost-burden status by household type, 2020



Notes: HUD defines a household as cost-burdened when it spends more than 30% of its income on rent and utilities and severely cost-burdened when it spends more than 50% of its income on these expenses.

Sources: U.S. HUD, 2020; BERK, 2024.

Needs expressed by the community

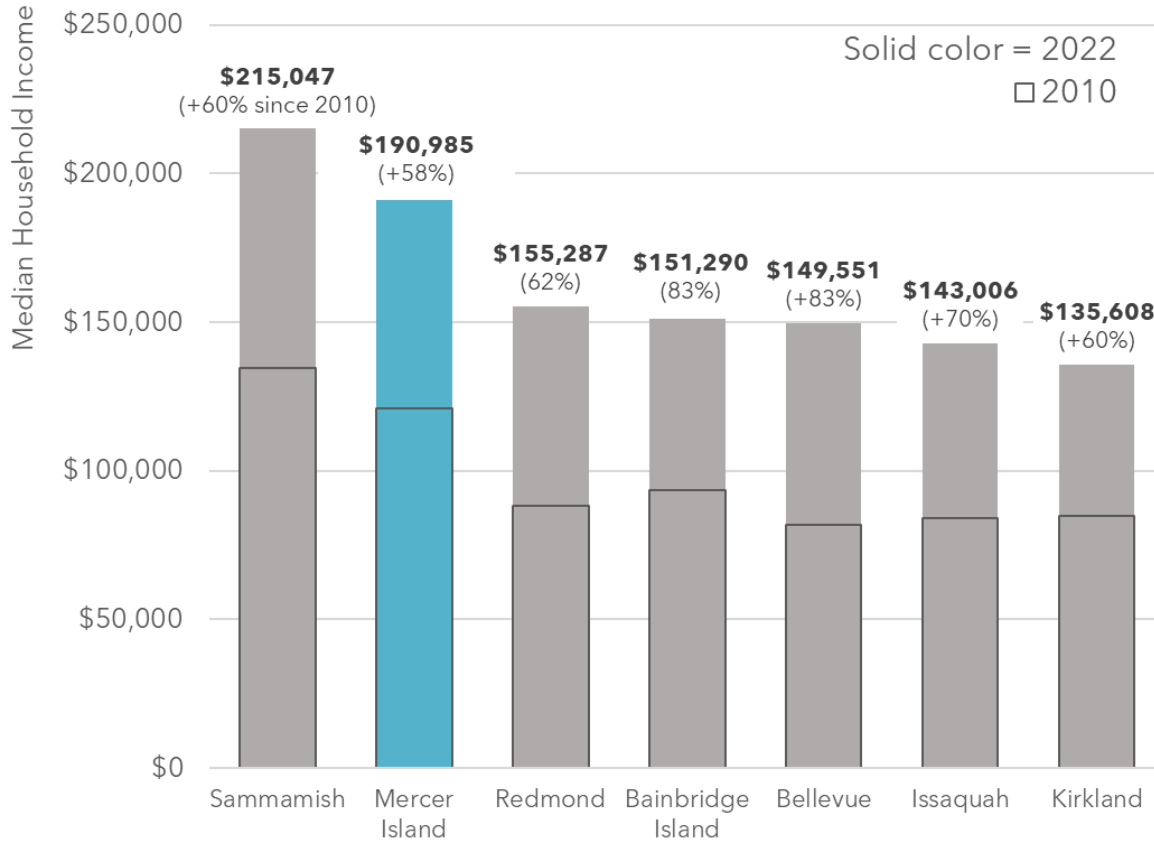
The following are thoughts on need and suggestions from a focus group with seniors and MIYFS staff who work directly with seniors:

- Community and connection for all seniors, through events that involve learning and education, and activities for seniors around health and fitness.
- Grief and loss support groups.
- A geriatric specialist (since the last one left) to provide counseling to seniors.
- Ways to help with caregiver support and fatigue.
- Welcome programs especially for new immigrants that are in language and culturally sensitive.
- Donation events and opportunities to help support seniors in need.
- Energy and desire for partnership from various senior groups and organizations around the Island.
- Connect seniors with youth on the island.
- Many seniors are not aware of existing resources. There is need for communication and outreach through:
 - Translated materials on the City website
 - Resource guide
 - Direct outreach for those that not using technology
 - Engagement with religious communities and interfaith spaces
 - Engagement with neighborhood networks - have a point person for each neighborhood for communication

Financial Distress

Mercer Island is at the higher end of median household income even among other relatively affluent comparison cities. Median income has increased significantly since 2017.

Exhibit 19. Median household income, Mercer Island and comparison cities, 2010 and 2022



Note: Median household incomes represent nominal dollars for 2010 and 2022.

Sources: ACS 5-year Estimates, 2006-2010 and, 2018-2022; BERK, 2024.


















Despite the high median household income, many focus group participants reported a sense of stress among affluent families to sustain or attain a certain lifestyle. This financial stress is felt by children as the desire to maintain affluence impacts the narrative around success. Those that struggle to afford to live in Mercer Island often do not leave because they don't want to lose the services and support.

MIYFS primarily serves residents with lower incomes with acute needs. However, there are other residents with low incomes who are not aware of the resources available to them and are not connected to MIYFS.

Self-sufficiency wage standards are an important indicator that can help paint a holistic picture of how the high cost of living is experienced in an affluent community like Mercer Island.

Data from UW Center for Women’s Welfare⁵ underscores that there is a huge portion of the population technically above the federal poverty line that nonetheless struggles with financial security due to high costs of living. Exhibit 20 breaks down self-sufficiency standards by household type and type of children. Families with infants and infant preschoolers have significantly higher monthly costs driven largely by the cost of childcare.

Exhibit 20. Self-sufficiency levels for different household and family types, 2023

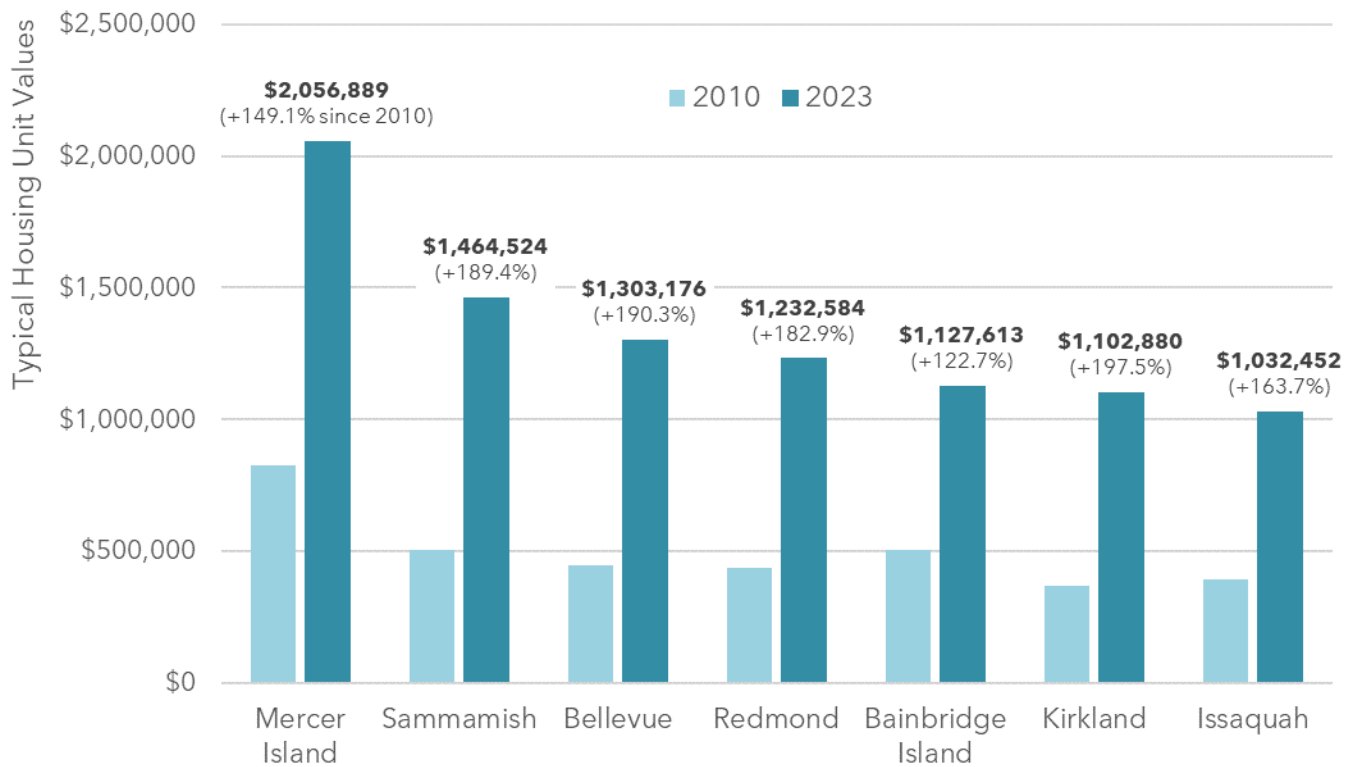
	 Adult	 Adult Preschooler	 Adult Infant Preschooler	 Adult Infant School-Age	 Adult School-Age Teenager	 2 Adults Infant	 2 Adults Infant Preschooler	 2 Adults Preschooler School-Age
Monthly Costs								
 Housing	\$2,511	\$2,935	\$2,935	\$2,935	\$2,935	\$2,935	\$2,935	\$2,935
 Child Care	\$0	\$1,814	\$3,930	\$3,169	\$1,053	\$2,116	\$3,930	\$2,867
 Food	\$417	\$615	\$798	\$902	\$1,052	\$940	\$1,107	\$1,217
 Transportation	\$99	\$99	\$99	\$99	\$99	\$198	\$198	\$198
 Health Care	\$181	\$611	\$630	\$644	\$701	\$677	\$703	\$724
 Miscellaneous	\$410	\$697	\$928	\$864	\$673	\$817	\$1,017	\$924
 Taxes	\$737	\$1,566	\$2,632	\$2,296	\$1,364	\$1,530	\$2,287	\$1,842
 Child Care Tax Credit	\$0	(\$50)	(\$100)	(\$100)	(\$100)	(\$50)	(\$100)	(\$100)
 Child Tax Credit	0	(\$167)	(\$333)	(\$333)	(\$333)	(\$167)	(\$333)	(\$333)
Self-Sufficiency Wage								
Hourly	\$24.74	\$46.14	\$65.45	\$59.52	\$42.30	\$25.56 (per adult)	\$33.36 (per adult)	\$29.19 (per adult)
Monthly	\$4,355	\$8,120	\$11,519	\$10,476	\$7,445	\$8,996	\$11,744	\$10,275
Annual	\$52,256	\$97,446	\$138,226	\$125,709	\$89,335	\$107,995	\$140,922	\$123,298
Emergency Savings Fund	\$138	\$297	\$561	\$482	\$305	\$153	\$2209	\$204
Percent of Federal Poverty Level	330%	464%	563%	512%	364%	440%	456%	399%

Source: University of Washington, Center for Women’s Welfare, 2023; BERK, 2024.

One aspect of the cost of living is home prices and rent. Mercer Island’s growth in home values may be slightly slower than many other comparison cities but, overall home prices are nearly double that of several other comparison cities (Exhibit 21).

⁵ The most localized we can get is East King County, which includes Mercer Island

Exhibit 21. Typical housing value, Mercer Island and comparison cities, 2010 and 2023

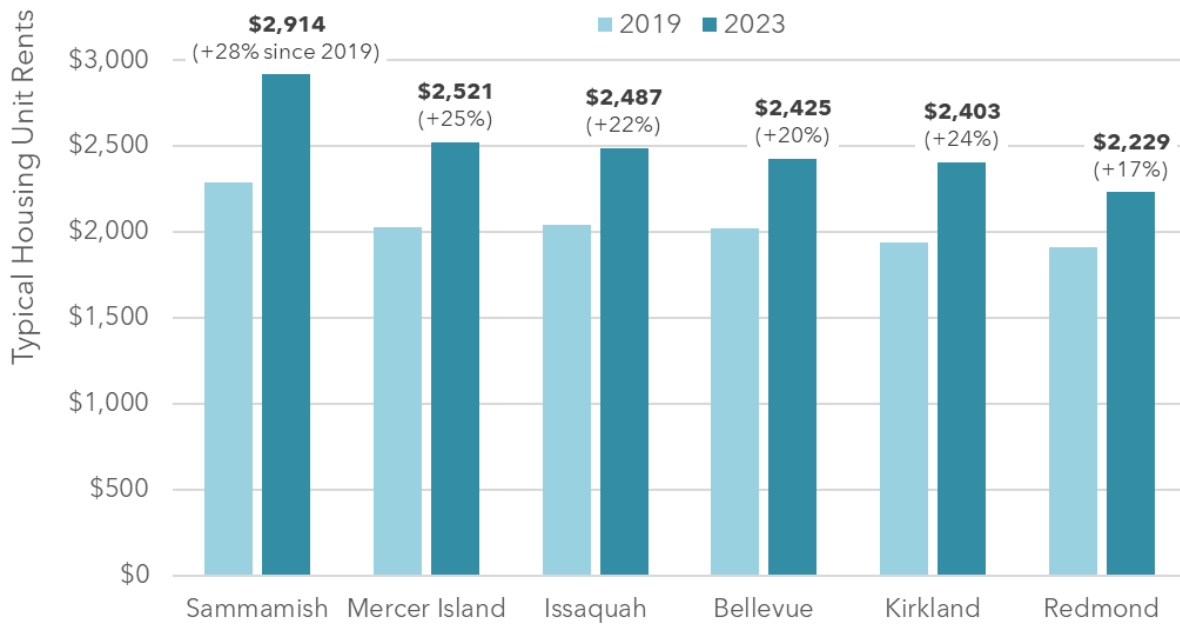


Note: Typical housing values are based on the Zillow Home Value Index, which measures the typical home value and market changes across a given region and housing type. The measure reflects the typical value for homes in the 35th to 65th percentile range. Values are in nominal dollars.

Sources: Zillow, 2023; BERK, 2024.

Actual rents in 2023 are higher than all but one comparison city (Exhibit 22). Increases in rents in Mercer Island since 2019 are at the higher end of all comparison cities but rents increased by more than 10% in nominal terms in all cities.

Exhibit 22. Typical housing rent prices, Mercer Island and comparison cities, 2019 and 2023



Note: Data not available for Bainbridge Island before 2023, and not consistently available for the other comparison cities before 2019. Values are in nominal dollars. Typical rents are based on the Zillow Observed Rent Index which is a smoothed measure of the typical observed market rate rent across a given region. It is a repeat-rent index that is weighted to the rental housing stock to ensure representativeness across the entire market, not just those homes currently listed for-rent.

Sources: Zillow, 2023; BERK, 2024.

Students from households with low incomes

In affluent communities such as Mercer Island, the challenges for students who are not as financially privileged are heightened. These students may find themselves more visible within the community, adding another layer of difficulty to their academic and social experiences. Over the past eight academic years, the number of students from households with low incomes has increased in the Mercer Island School District even as total student enrollment has dropped (Exhibit 23).

Roughly 7% of Mercer Island youth (i.e., residents under the age of 19) are with Medicaid or other means-tested public coverage.⁶

⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, "Medicaid/Means-Tested Public Coverage by Sex by Age," 2022. ACS 5-Year Estimates Detailed Tables, Table C27007, 2022.

Exhibit 23. Mercer Island Public School students experiencing financial distress and housing insecurity, 2016 to 2024

	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024	Change 2017-2024
All students	4,505	4,550	4,524	4,496	4,199	4,069	4,063	3,975	-12%
Students experiencing homelessness	16	9	13	7	14	6	15	n/a	-6%
As share	0.4%	0.2%	0.3%	0.2%	0.3%	0.1%	0.4%	0.0%	
Low-income students	167	162	189	167	151	208	225	249	+49%
As share	4%	4%	4%	4%	4%	5%	6%	6%	

Note: 2023-2024 data for students experiencing homelessness is not yet reliably available. Change over time for this data point is therefore calculated through the 2022-2023 school year.

Sources: WA OSPI, 2024; BERK, 2024.

Basic Needs

During the pandemic, there was increased demand for support with meeting basic needs. This was often due to job loss; reduced working hours to accommodate childcare needs or other caregiving responsibilities; less job growth in entry-level and service industries; and inflation and rising prices. Notably, demand for food assistance quadrupled during the pandemic. School District and MIYFS staff worked to provide food and clothing assistance to students in need.

The pandemic necessitated and fostered new levels of internal collaboration among the City of Mercer Island departments. Staff embraced these opportunities, implementing innovative ideas such as gift cards for the food pantry, increased use of the Mercer Island Community and Event Center for YFS programs, enhanced communication with the police, and new support for seniors including the seniors resource fair to better serve residents.

Needs expressed by the community

Many of the residents who participated in focus groups were not aware of available resources and suggested enhanced outreach to families that would benefit from additional support. The following are needs related to basic needs

- Employment assistance as career paths shifted during the pandemic
- Financial support for preschool and afterschool care
- Financial assistance for back-to-school readiness
- Support for working families juggling caring for children and aging parents
- Additional rent assistance as federal pandemic-era programs come to an end

Conclusion

The focus groups and quantitative data from secondary sources highlighted the need for continued support in many areas MIYFS is already addressing, such as school-based services, community mental health for all ages, family assistance, and senior services. Many participants in the discussions expressed gratitude and appreciation for the staff of MIYFS and the services provided. As is typical in the human services landscape, there is a need for additional resources to address heightened and emergent needs in several areas. However, if resources are limited, MIYFS should address specific needs arising from demographic changes and historically marginalized groups.

Implementation of any initiatives can benefit from engaging affected community members as partners, particularly with members of traditionally marginalized groups for whom a voice in implementation is more appropriate and empowering than simply sharing needs. A key area of focus should be increasing outreach and partnerships with these marginalized groups as well as youth and seniors through advisory boards, to provide more relevant programming and resources to ensure MIYFS program offerings remain relevant and responsive to evolving community human service needs.

The findings from this report can support MIYFS staff develop and refine their biannual work plan to address community needs and gaps including:

- Youth mental health capacity overall, and additional support for elementary school counselors
- Continued focus on prevention services to address youth and young adult drug and alcohol use
- Addressing social media risks, particularly to youth
- Youth service learning and volunteer opportunities
- Parenting programs to support parents and evolving needs of their children
- Senior support services and opportunity for connection and relationship building
- Specialized support groups dedicated to distinct demographics and challenges
- Additional or collaborative programming to support broad community engagement and foster stronger, more meaningful connections