

BENTON COMMUNITY
FOUNDATION

2024 QUALITY OF LIFE REPORT

INTRODUCTION

Thanks to generous funding from the Lilly Endowment, in early 2024 the Benton Community Foundation gathered information from residents about their quality of life and perceptions of the greatest opportunities to improve the quality of life throughout the county. Over 800 Benton County residents participated in this information gathering – either by attending community conversations organized by the Benton Community Foundation or responding to a quality of life survey – providing a wealth of information to inform future development planning.

Quality of life is a multidimensional concept that varies from person to person and from community to community. It's not just about material wealth or individual success, but encompasses the conditions that support the holistic well-being and happiness of individuals and communities. There are many personal and community factors that influence quality of life: physical health, mental and emotional well-being, social relationships,

This quality of life report gathered information from residents with the intent to improve the quality of life throughout the county.

economic security, environmental quality, recreational opportunities, personal fulfillment, and cultural connections among them.

Through the years, Benton County residents have engaged in many projects to improve the community's quality of life. Several previous community development activities have been incredibly successful, while others have faced challenges and have yet to be realized. Funding is a continuing obstacle in Benton County, as in other rural communities throughout Indiana and the United States.



In August 2024, the Benton Community Foundation partnered with Ball State University to present a multi-day community development course to equip community leaders with the knowledge and skills to respond to the changes and challenges in rural Benton County and to pursue opportunities in a comprehensive and creative way. This course was developed by the Indiana Communities Institute at Ball State University in partnership with Creative Insight Community Development and was also made possible by funding from the Lilly Endowment.

Point-In-Time Summary: 2024

- Population (July 1, 2023 estimate): 8,729 residents¹.
- Ethnicity: Predominantly White (96.1%), with small percentages of Latino, Black and other minority groups.
- Household Composition: The average household size is 2.51, with a mix of family households and individuals living alone.
- Economic Development: There is a strong focus on attracting new businesses and supporting local enterprises to boost the economy.
- Environmental Concerns: Agricultural sustainability and water quality are major concerns due to the county's significant farming activities.
- Healthcare Access: Access to health care services is limited due to the nature of the rural area. The county has a few primary care clinics and is served by hospitals in neighboring counties for more advanced medical needs.

- Unemployment Rate: As of May 2024, the current unemployment rate is 3.4%, slightly below the overall rate in Indiana of 3.9%².
- Poverty Rate: 10.1% of residents live below the federal poverty level.
- Schools: Benton Community School Corporation serves the county with two elementary schools and a combined Junior and Senior High School.
- Educational Attainment: Over 88% of the population holds a high school diploma, and 18.7% holds a bachelor's degree or higher.

Methodology

Benton Community Foundation received 477 responses to the survey, in English and Spanish, including online responses as well as paper surveys that were made available during community conversations and at other community events. Responses came from a broad range of age groups, including high school students under the age of 18 as well as a few residents over the age of 85. The breakdown of responses was well-distributed across the age ranges, ensuring that the survey results were representative of the population.

¹ <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/bentoncountyindiana/PST045223>

² https://www.stats.indiana.edu/profiles/profiles.asp?scope_choice=a&county_changer=18007



THE FIGURES

70%

OF RESIDENTS
HAVE LIVED IN
BENTON COUNTY
10+ YEARS

35-54
YEARS OLD

IS THE AGE RANGE
MOST BENTON
COUNTY RESIDENTS
BELONG TO

30%

OF COMMUNITY
MEMBERS SAID A
SENSE OF SAFETY
MOST ADDS TO THEIR
QUALITY OF LIFE

Methodology (cont.)

Additionally, we received responses from both new residents of Benton County and those who have been long-time residents. More than 70% of the respondents have lived in Benton County more than 10 years. This diversity of age ranges and length of residence in the county enriched our information-gathering process by providing a comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand.

In addition to the quality of life survey, the Benton Community Foundation facilitated a series of community conversations to gather input from residents. These 45 gatherings included town hall meetings, stakeholder lunches, evening gatherings at the Fowler Theater, small-group afternoon chats at the Benton Community Foundation office, and participation at local organizations' meetings. In total, approximately 340 residents were involved in these convenings, providing their input as to what they consider the most important opportunities for the revitalization of Benton County.

BASED ON 477 RESPONSES TO THE SURVEY



KEY FINDINGS

Priorities: Food Access and Economic Development

The two primary issues identified by survey respondents as the most pressing need were food access (28% of respondents) and economic development (24% of respondents).

Factually, there are very few grocery options in Benton County, and many residents drive a long distance to shop outside of the county. The entire western side of the county has no grocery stores at all, forcing many residents to drive 45 minutes each way to buy groceries in neighboring Newton County. This is a tremendous burden for families, especially those with limited transportation options. In Eastern Benton County, the only grocery option is Otterbein Foods, a small, local grocery store where prices tend to be higher than national chains. Many residents resort to buying groceries at Dollar General and other similar stores, where prices are lower, but food freshness, nutrition, and quality are not high. The Market by Midwest Prime Foods is one source of fresh, healthy foods in Oxford, but much greater access is needed.

Future efforts at economic revitalization of Benton County will instill a sense of pride and community spirit among residents. We have seen this already with the example of the Fowler Theater, which brought volunteers together and strengthened community ties. When local businesses thrive, public spaces are well-maintained, and residents have opportunities for economic and social advancement, it fosters a sense of belonging and pride in the community, enhancing overall well-being and quality of life.

Securing funding resources is essential for driving investment in Benton County. By identifying and obtaining grants and other financial support, we can develop programs that maximize local employment opportunities, support local businesses, and invest in workforce development. These efforts engage the community and foster job creation and retention. Leveraging such funding will empower and uplift the local workforce and economy, contributing significantly to the overall prosperity and vitality of Benton County.



Safety is a Community Asset

Survey results indicate that Benton County residents feel a strong sense of safety in their community, which significantly enhances their overall quality of life. This sense of security allows them to engage freely in local activities, build stronger neighborhood connections, and enjoy a higher level of well-being. The feeling of safety is a cornerstone of the community's positive environment, contributing to the residents' satisfaction and happiness.

Dreams for the Community

The Benton County quality of life surveys provided invaluable insights into the perspectives and experiences of our residents. The following comments represent some of the other major themes that emerged from the survey, highlighting key areas of concern and appreciation within the community. These themes include the need for improved infrastructure, a desire for enhanced community services, and the importance of fostering a vibrant local economy. By understanding these core issues, we can better address the needs of our residents and work towards creating a thriving and supportive environment for all.

When asked “What is your dream for Benton County?” these were some of the responses:

- “Thriving small towns with businesses lining the Main Streets and peppered through the countryside.”
- “Provide economic opportunities so that people want to come here and stay.”
- “Affordable housing, medical services, and food access.”
- “None of our small towns has a grocery store. Desperately need one.”
- “Infrastructure for economic growth. Like a hotel, restaurants, grocery store. We have a beautiful park in every town. We need to see growth without infringing on the farming community.”
- “I don't think anyone could ever spend too much money on our children. They are the future. Their education, safety, afterschool activities, places to play and learn and have fun. I think they should always be thought of first.”
- “Community center for gathering and exercise, attract more small businesses such as restaurants and grocery stores, more outdoor recreational areas.”



NEXT STEPS

Recommendations

To enhance the well-being of Benton County, the Benton Community Foundation will continue to serve the community living out its vision and mission to inspire positive change and foster collaboration. Conducting the quality of life survey has identified areas of need and opportunity, which will ensure that future efforts are data driven and focused on the most pressing issues. By concentrating on long-term planning and capacity building, the Benton Community Foundation can ensure sustainable and impactful efforts to improve the quality of life in Benton County. Specific recommendations include:

- Develop strategic partnerships with local government, nonprofits, businesses, and community organizations.
- Form advisory councils and host regular forums to facilitate dialogue and ensure diverse stakeholder representation in decision-making.
- Secure funding through grants, fundraising, and building an endowment fund to provide resources for these initiatives.

- Implement pilot programs, prioritizing robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks and channels for community feedback.
- Promote awareness through effective communication strategies.
- Foster a culture of philanthropy to engage the community and inspire further participation.

Next Steps

By laying the groundwork for collaborative efforts and creating partnerships, the Benton Community Foundation can foster an environment where transformative projects thrive. These initiatives will collectively enhance the well-being and quality of life in Benton County, ensuring a brighter and more sustainable future for all residents. Through strategic planning, community engagement, and a commitment to continuous improvement, the Benton Community Foundation will partner with residents and community stakeholders to create positive, lasting change.





BENTON COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

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