

OUR GIRLS

State of Women and
Children Report 2.0
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
May 2023



women
HELPING
women
FUND

Setting the Stage

When it comes to supporting women and children in Spokane County, Women Helping Women Fund (WHWF) believes in collective collaboration between funders, researchers, community organizations, scholars, and other leaders including you—individual readers and strategic givers. Our 2023 Report—*Our Girls*—provides an update to the 2019 publication, “Changing Our Forecast: State of Women and Children in Spokane County.” Our purpose is to drive positive change on the most important issues affecting women and children in our community.

This summary provides a snapshot of some of the key issues included in the full *Our Girls* report; it is not a replacement for the full report. You are invited to learn more at www.whwfspokane.org/data-and-research



Project Funders



Spokane Regional Domestic
Violence Coalition

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This project was lovingly guided by a steering committee of local women—mothers, daughters, sisters, scientists, scholars, service providers, neighbors, friends, and advocates—who explored topics that shape wellness from birth to old age through a lens of equity and curiosity about the primary policy and system factors that shape well-being.





We used multiple sources and types of information to understand how our community's systems, policies, and conditions drive differences in well-being based on qualities like race, education, and income. We heard from service providers and community members, talked with stakeholders about our community's strengths and needs, studied available data, and reviewed local, state, and national research. We are grateful to "Our Girls," the women who contributed their stories and viewpoints to provide a more complete picture.

"Fight for the things that you care about, but do it in a way that will lead others to join you."

Ruth Bader Ginsburg,
late Supreme Court Justice

Our Community

Spokane County sits on the traditional land and gathering ground for many indigenous nations, including the Spokane and Kalispel Tribes, Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, and others.

Today, Spokane County is home to over half a million people (Figure 1).¹ The collective community of "Our Girls" is made up of women and children from many different walks of life, histories, races, and ethnicities in all of Spokane's neighborhoods.

Compared to Washington State as a whole, a higher proportion of residents in Spokane County identify as White. With each new generation, our community is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse (Figure 2).²



Figure 1: SPOKANE COUNTY IS WASHINGTON'S FOURTH LARGEST IN POPULATION
 Distribution of women and children by neighborhood in Spokane County (2020)

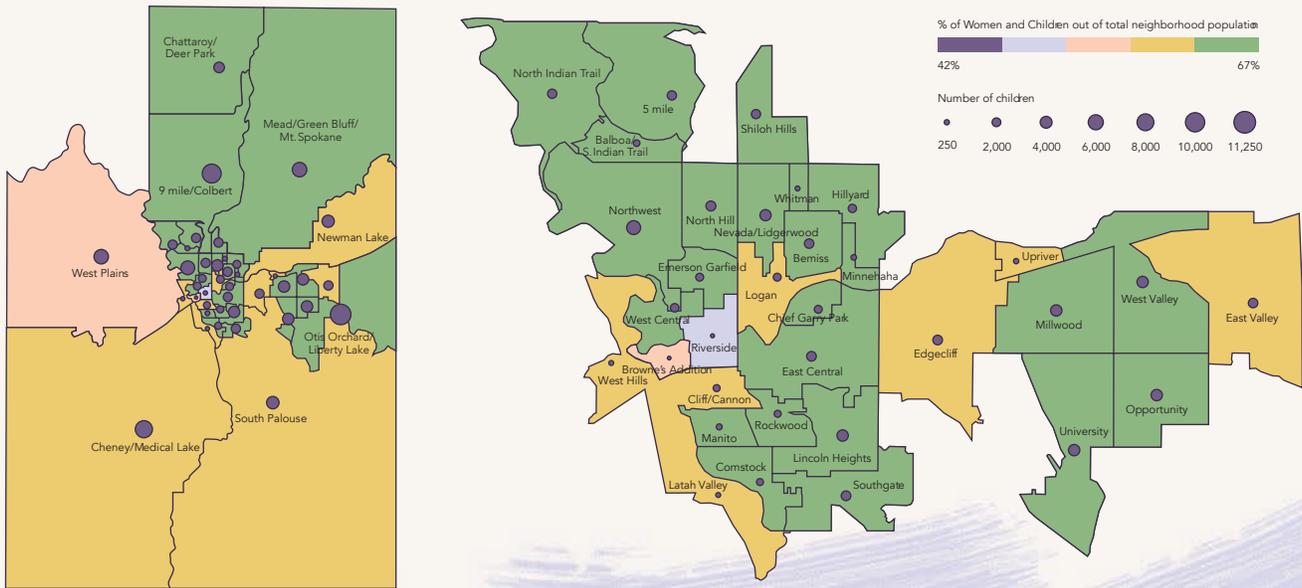
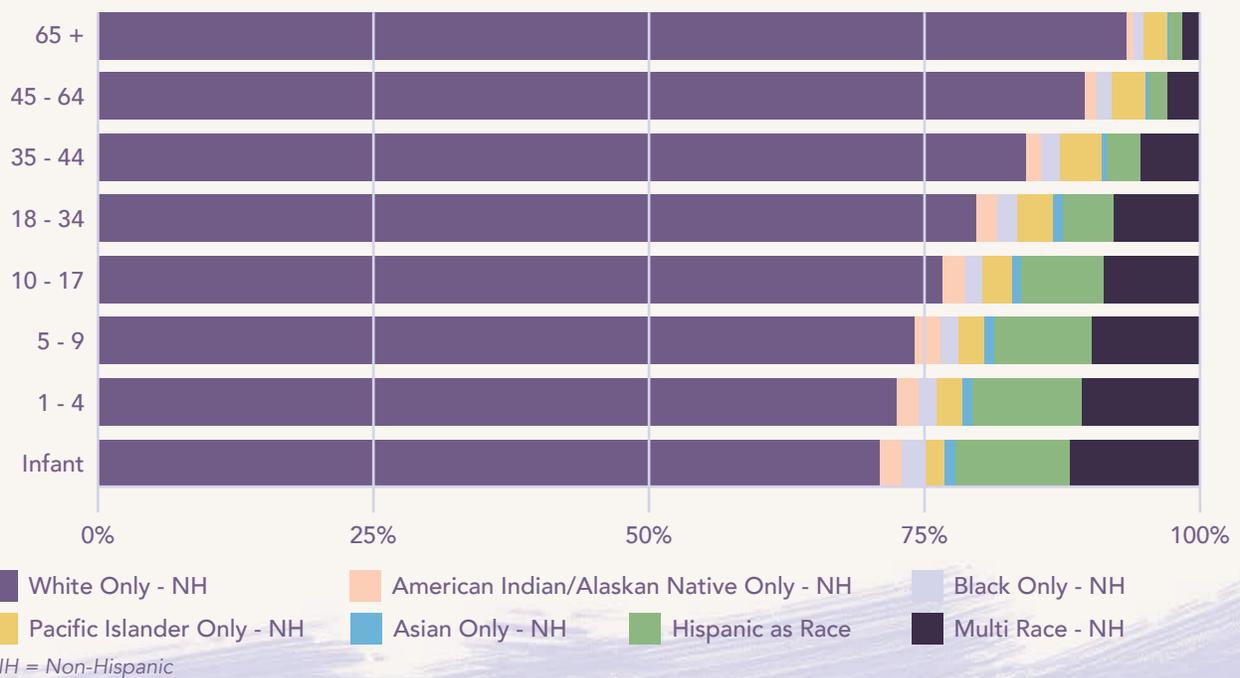


Figure 2: SPOKANE COUNTY'S YOUNGER GENERATIONS ARE MORE RACIALLY AND ETHNICALLY DIVERSE THAN OLDER ADULTS
 Race/ethnicity by age group, percentage of Spokane County Population (2020)





How Are “Our Girls” Doing?

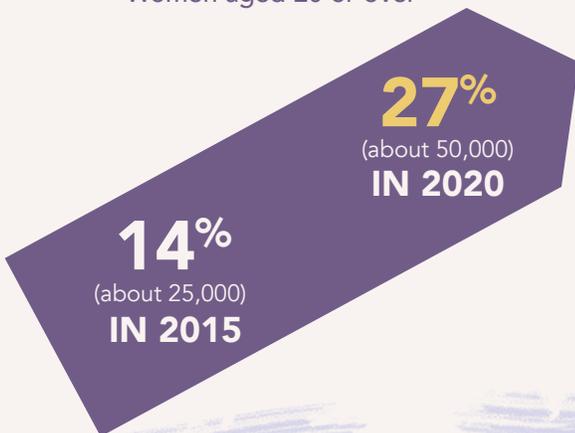
Life has been good in Spokane County for many residents, but many lives have changed in the last few years due to COVID-19 and other trends. Roughly eight in ten women said they had “good” or better quality of life in 2015, compared to nine in ten in 2020 (Figure 4).³

Figure 4: **9 OUT OF 10** WOMEN FELT THEIR QUALITY OF LIFE WAS “GOOD” OR BETTER IN 2020



The proportion of women who struggled with poor mental health nearly doubled between 2015 and 2020 from 14% to 27% (Figure 3).⁴ Considering parents in particular, moms were more than twice as likely as dads to have poor mental health (29% compared to 14%).⁵

Figure 3: **MORE WOMEN STRUGGLED WITH POOR MENTAL HEALTH**
Women aged 20 or over



When caregivers have poor mental and emotional health, their children’s well-being suffers, creating cycles that could impact “Our Girls” and their families for generations.⁶

Tragically, suicide was the second leading cause of death for children and youth in Spokane County in 2021. That year, 29% of girls and 12% of boys in grades 8, 10, and 12 said they seriously considered suicide (Figure 5).⁷

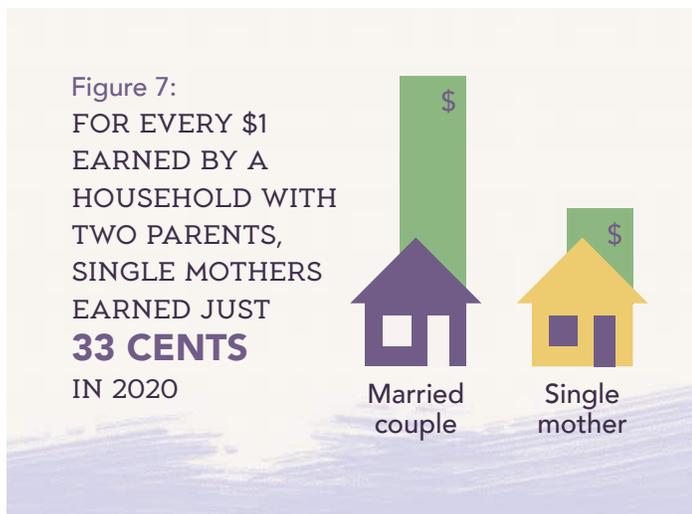
Figure 5: **PERCENTAGE OF YOUTH IN GRADES 8, 10, AND 12 WHO SERIOUSLY CONSIDERED SUICIDE IN 2021**



Why Are “Our Girls” And Their Families Struggling?

Too many families have a hard time affording basic needs, like food, transportation, and child care.⁸ And worrying about finances can negatively impact mental and emotional well-being.

In 2020, the economic security of Spokane County households was connected to their family structure, race, and education.⁹ Certain policies and practices, both past and present, create barriers to good quality of life for many women and children based on factors like ability, educational attainment, nationality, and race. For example, single-parent families, women, Black and American Indian/Alaska Native households, and mothers with less educational success were less likely to have jobs with family-sustaining pay in Spokane County.¹⁰



Single women with children were the least likely to earn a living wage. One in five kids in our county lived with single mothers who, on average, earned less than a third of the income for families with two parents in 2020 (Figure 6 and 7).¹¹ Without family-supporting incomes, affording basic necessities can feel impossible.

Je “Our Girl” Jessie remembers her mom working two jobs to support their family while she was growing up. Jessie remembers times when her family had their heat shut off, and times when they were homeless and showered at hotels. Even though life seemed tough on the outside, her mom raised Jessie and her siblings with emotional resilience, patience, and unconditional love.

Parents who work outside the home need safe places for their children while they work. But child care is expensive, and even families with financial resources may struggle to find safe, quality care.

After paying for childcare, a single mother earning the median salary of \$31,158 a year (about \$2,600 per month) would have just over \$520 left over for food, rent, utilities and other necessities each month. Without the help of support programs, the average monthly cost of childcare for one infant and one preschooler is \$2,080.¹²

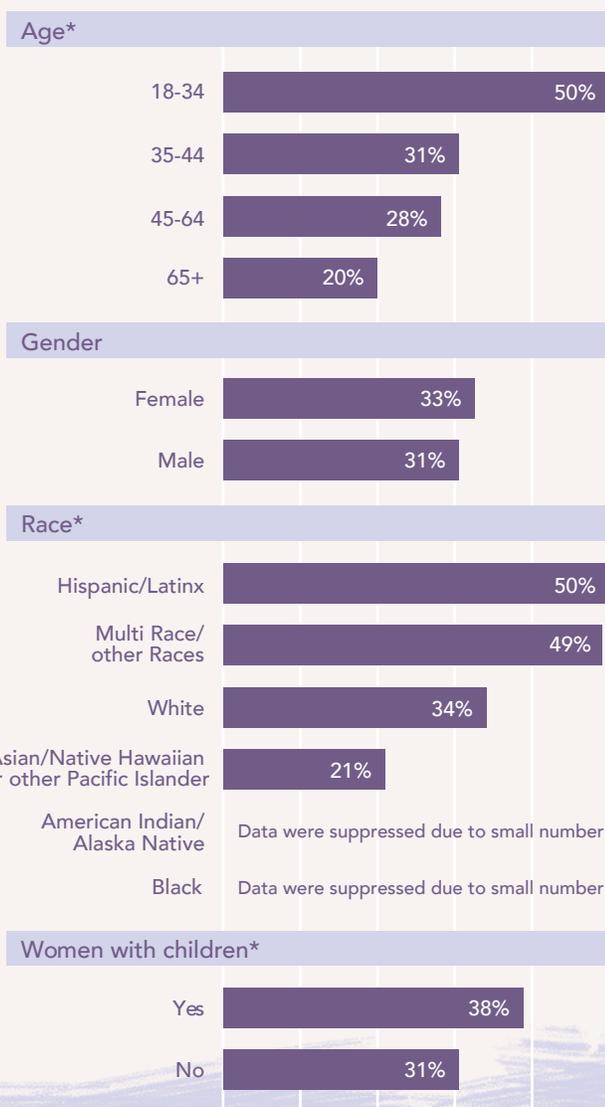
Making matters worse, our community only had enough child care providers in 2021 for about half of children under age six who lived in homes where both caregivers worked, or just 38% of all children under age five.¹³

Is “Our Girl” Isabella shares her challenges finding child care. “Child care is an issue in our community. Couple times I thought about going back to work part-time, but child care is huge issue for us, particularly for my family because we don’t qualify for certain programs and I don’t feel safe taking my kids to any childcare in [this] area.”

Figure 8:

A THIRD OF WOMEN—AND HALF OF YOUNG WOMEN—LIVED IN AN UNSTABLE HOUSING SITUATION

Percent of Spokane County women who self-reported that they experienced at least one unstable housing situation in the last 5 years, including doubling up with family and friends; skipping a home payment or not paying the full amount; moving due to home payments or other bills; using housing assistance; living in a motel/hotel, outside, in a vehicle, or in a treatment program, hospital, or nursing home (2020)



*There is a statistically significant difference across groups

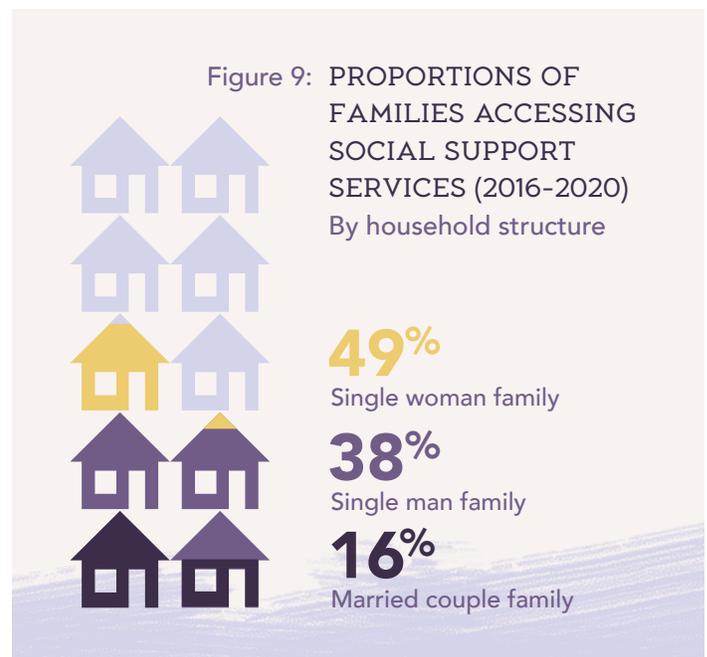
Finding a quality home can also be a serious challenge, especially for lower income families who are more likely to rent. In 2021, only 1.8% of rental housing units were vacant in Spokane County, making affordable rentals hard to find (Figure 8).¹⁴ Rent is a major expense for some people, especially lower-income families. Most households that earned under \$35,000 a year spent at least 30 cents of every dollar they earned on rent alone.¹⁵ This leaves too many families with unstable housing situations, like doubling up with family, skipping home payments, or even chronic homelessness.

What Economic Supports Are Available For Families?

Sometimes instability and stress are inevitable, and without a stable foundation one bad break in life could be catastrophic. Recovering from a job loss or taking care of an ill family member can be especially difficult without access to jobs that pay a family-sustaining income.

Fortunately, “Our Girls” families have access to programs that can help them afford nutritious food and other basic needs (Figure 9).^{16, 17, 18}

Social service programs help but there’s a catch. A small increase in income can mean losing more benefits than gained in income—a situation known as the “benefit cliff” which can essentially anchor families into—rather than lift out of—poverty.¹⁹



Wi *“Our Girl” Willow has a son with special needs and relies on public benefits to ensure that he gets the services he needs. Willow has long-term goals of completing a degree and securing better employment. But like other “Our Girls,” Willow faces the challenges of the benefit cliff and carefully watches her income to make sure she doesn’t lose essential medical benefits her son needs. “We have to choose between our son getting what he needs or living a comfortable life. We’ve chosen our son.”*

What Happens If Struggling Families Don’t Have Support?

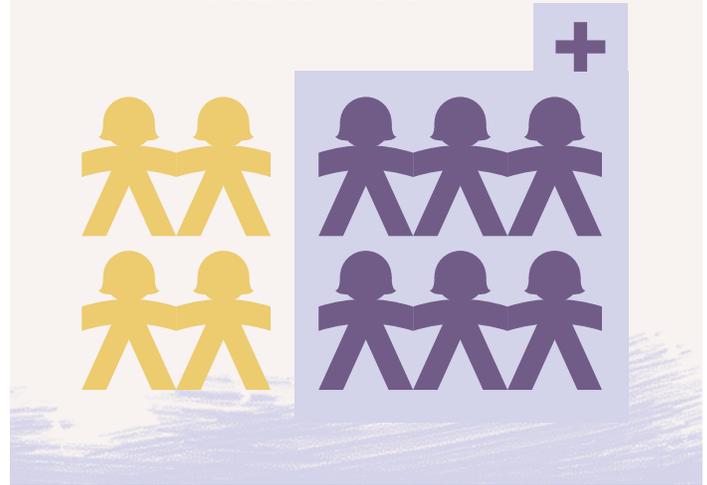
“Our Girls” need dependable, emotionally resilient caregivers to build strong futures on sturdy foundations. Children who can control their emotions, behave in age-appropriate ways, and cope with difficult situations grow into adults with resilient families.

Without healthy connections and access to resources, some of “Our Girls” families live with stress, anxiety, and worry that can worsen physical and mental health conditions and increase use of alcohol, tobacco, and drugs.²⁰

Even as more people struggle with poor mental health, a shortage of providers, cost of treatment, COVID-related restrictions, and other barriers prevented many people from accessing the mental and behavioral support they needed in 2021 (Figure 10).²¹



Figure 10: **4 OUT OF 10** MOTHERS WITH POOR MENTAL HEALTH DID NOT RECEIVE THE ESSENTIAL SERVICES THEY NEEDED IN 2020



Racial and ethnic identity, immigrant or refugee status, or speaking a different language, made it even harder to find providers who could understand and provide culturally informed services. It was especially challenging to find help for youth: fewer than two in ten Medicaid adolescents with substance use disorder received treatment in 2021 (Figure 11).²²

Figure 11: **8 OUT OF 10** MEDICAID ADOLESCENTS WITH SUBSTANCE ABUSE DISORDER DID NOT RECEIVE TREATMENT (2020-2021)



When girls and women with substance use disorders become pregnant, it can be especially difficult to find vital treatment services. Stigma, fear of child welfare involvement, and a lack of access to culturally-responsive and evidence-based services keep many expecting moms from seeking important prenatal medical care and early physical and mental health screenings.²³ Even women who are able to get help for substance use issues might be separated from their children in our current system.

A community service provider shared her belief that disjointed and fragmented medical and social services force additional trauma onto women and children seeking help.

“The greatest trauma you can put on a baby is to separate them from their mother.”

The rate of CPS-accepted referrals for child abuse and neglect had been steadily climbing in Spokane County and Washington State in the years leading up to 2017, with a total of 6,564 cases in 2017 (a little less than 6% of children in the county).²⁴ That’s enough children and youth to fill half the seats in the Spokane Arena. Spokane County was one of the top three counties in Washington for the number of newborns and babies placed in care due to parental substance use in 2021, behind King and Pierce counties. Racial inequities occur at various decision points in the child welfare continuum; Black and American Indian/Alaska Native babies and pregnant women are more likely to be referred to child welfare due to implicit biases in the system, and Black parents are less likely to be reunited with their children.

“Our Girls” can thrive as responsible, productive adults when they grow up in safe homes where their basic needs are met by emotionally and financially stable caregivers. Barriers to resources and services, community violence, racism and discrimination, past trauma, and other issues mean some of “Our Girls” are likely to grow up with unsafe environments and circumstances.²⁵ Students dealing with violence and trauma in their homes have a harder time learning and focusing in school.

Beyond the imminent consequences to their safety and well-being, experiencing violence as a child or

teen increases the odds that “Our Girls” will encounter violence in the future.

Domestic violence—violence between family and household members—has increased in the last few years from 10.4 domestic violence offenses reported to police per 1,000 people in 2016 to 14.2 per 1,000 people in 2020, nearly double the rate for the state as a whole (Figure 11).²⁶

Figure 11: VIOLENCE KEEPS MANY YOUNG PEOPLE FROM SUCCEEDING ACADEMICALLY AND EMOTIONALLY

Percent of youth who reported failing in school or feeling depressed in the past 12 months by exposure to violence (2021)



Aa *“Our Girl” Aaliyah thought she had escaped violence when she fled her home country, but over time her husband became physically and emotionally violent. Aaliyah knew her children deserved a safe home, so she learned English against his wishes and eventually left the abusive relationship. Once she got her driver’s license—she had not been allowed by her husband to drive—she discovered newfound independence and freedom. Her abusive ex-husband recently asked her to take him back. Her response: “No thank you I’m done with you.”*

How Does Where You Live Matter?

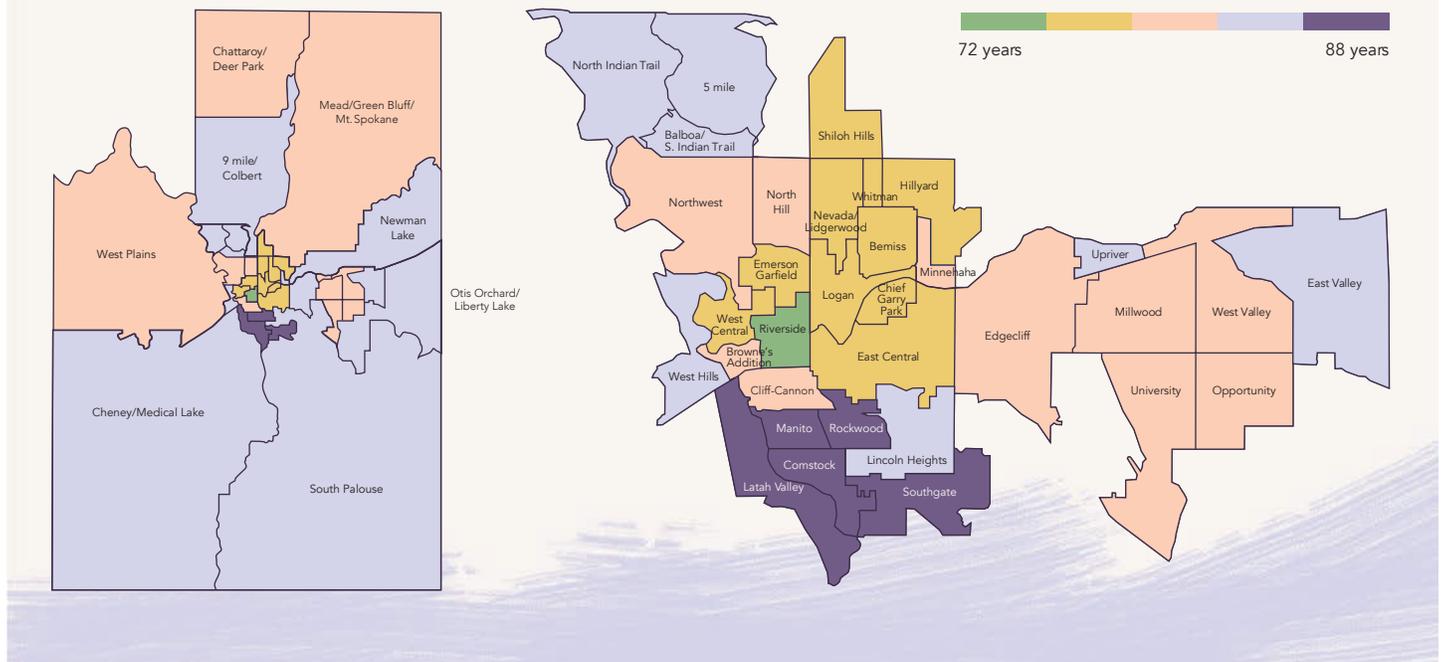
Communities where families can easily access the resources they need—financial support, health care, mental health services, well-resourced schools, safe homes, and quality child care—protect “Our Girls” from violence and trauma over their entire life course.²⁷ In contrast, historically underserved communities with crime, unemployment, food insecurity, housing instability, and few opportunities for social connections or quality education put “Our Girls” at a greater risk of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), substance use disorder, suicide, and other negative outcomes.²⁸

Higher housing costs, the history of racial covenants and discriminatory policies like “redlining,” and other barriers mean protective neighborhoods are out of reach for many families, leaving too many children—especially lower-income children and families of color—stuck in neighborhoods with limited resources, little chance for economic growth, and scarce opportunities for positive social connections. As a result, where “Our Girls” live matters.

Wi “Our Girl” Willow lives in one of the neighborhoods in Spokane County with the lowest life expectancy for women. She described the challenges she faced: “[It has] been a big fight. I don’t know what it’s like living in other areas. We have the haves and the have nots. The leap is so large, don’t know if I’ll ever cross it. You have people settle into it (don’t fight it) or you fight the system. I’m not much of a “settle into things I don’t like” [kind of person]. I’m a fighter. My life in Spokane has been a fight.”

Women living in Spokane County’s wealthier Southgate neighborhood from 2011 to 2020 looked forward to a life expectancy of nearly 88 years.²⁹ However, people just miles away in the lower-income and more racially diverse Riverside neighborhood faced an estimated life expectancy of just 72 years—16 years shorter (Figure 12).³⁰

Figure 12: HISTORIC POLICIES HAVE LASTING IMPACTS ON “OUR GIRLS” LIFE EXPECTANCY
Life expectancy of women in years by neighborhood (2011-2020)





How Can We Make A Real Difference For “Our Girls” And Future Generations?

Just as a strong house depends on good construction, “Our Girls” well-being relies on access to the resources and opportunities that they need to build sturdy foundations and healthy lives.

Current trends in our community point to specific areas for opportunity, and fortunately a great body of research can help us identify what works. The full Report includes specific recommendations for our community, our organizations, and ourselves. Here are the highlights:

1. **Ensure** that all families have the same opportunity to afford basic needs and access vital services.
2. **Improve** access to culturally centered mental health resources for all ages.
3. **Support** programs and policies that help children grow in resilient households and safe communities.
4. **Create** opportunities to ensure everyone—especially members of historically excluded communities—feels a

sense of belonging and connectedness through shared decision making.

5. **Build** pathways to communities and resources that support well-being.

“Although each of us wants to make a difference for good, it’s important to remember that the service you give is never about you. The women and children who need help are always more important and quite literally, their lives depend upon the commitment of us all. You will never find anything as fulfilling, exciting, challenging or rewarding as helping others thrive.”

Mari Clack, co-founder and past President of Women Helping Women

When every individual can reach the resources and supports they need they can weather life’s storms and cultivate resilience through generations. Proactive investments in children and families pay off in the long term by cultivating productive and engaged future generations.

Get involved! Fight Like A Girl!

Cooperation is key for a thriving community. We all have a collective responsibility and must continue to work together to ensure all people have opportunities to achieve their best life—physically, mentally, socially, spiritually, economically, and civically. There is something that each of us can do. There is something that you can do.

1. **Knowledge is power.** Download and read the full report at www.whwfpokane.org/data-and-research
2. **Volunteer your time and talent.** Reach out to one of the many nonprofits doing great work and ask how you can get involved. Opportunities are shared at volunteerspokane.org
3. **Give.** Together we're growing a group of local, engaged and strategic givers. Learn more about the Women Helping Women Fund Giving Circle where donors make funding decisions together. Find out more at www.whwfpokane.org/donate
4. **Lend your voice.** Many organizations are working to develop policies to make changes upstream of key issues. The Washington State Women's Commission works to amplify the voices of women's organizations, other stakeholders with shared values and goals, and the voices of women. Check them out at wswc.wa.gov and subscribe for email updates. **We are women, hear us roar! #MakeYourVoiceHeard**



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Dedication

Our collective dream is that this report will contribute to improving our lives, our community, and our world in ways large or small. This report is dedicated in solidarity with all women who call Spokane County home. Together we are a community of “Our Girls” and we deserve opportunities to live our best lives.



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