

2026

NEEDS AND ASSETS REPORT



 **FIRST THINGS FIRST**

San Carlos Apache Region

San Carlos Apache Regional Partnership Council 2026 Needs and Assets Report

Funded by the
First Things First San Carlos Apache Regional Partnership Council

Prepared by the
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INTRODUCTION

Ninety percent of a child's brain growth occurs before kindergarten, and the quality of a child's early experiences impacts whether their brain will develop in positive ways that promote learning. Arizonans created First Things First (FTF) to help ensure that Arizona children have the opportunity to start kindergarten prepared to be successful. Understanding the critical role the early years play in a child's future success is crucial to our ability to foster each child's optimal development and in turn, impact all aspects of well-being in our communities and our state. This Needs and Assets Report for the FTF San Carlos Apache Region helps us in understanding the needs of young children, the resources available to meet those needs and gaps that may exist in those resources.

The 2026 report has been redesigned in response to stakeholder feedback. The main report is structured around four domains relevant to young children, their families, and the professionals who support them in the region:

- Child, Family & Community Characteristics
- Early Education
- Education & Workforce
- Child Health & Development

This main report uses an infographic and figure-based approach to analyze regional-level data trends, as well as how these regional trends compare to statewide trends. The FTF San Carlos Apache Regional Partnership Council recognizes the importance of investing in young children and ensuring that families and caregivers have options in supporting the healthy development and education of young children in their care. It is our sincere hope that this information will help guide community conversations about how we can best support school readiness for all children in the FTF San Carlos Apache Region. To that end, this information may be useful to local stakeholders as they work to enhance the resources available to young children and their families and as they make decisions about how best to support children birth to age 5 in communities throughout the region.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The FTF San Carlos Apache Regional Partnership Council wishes to thank all of the federal, state and local partners whose contributions of data, ongoing support and partnership with FTF made this report possible. These partners included the Arizona Departments of Administration (Employment and Population Statistics), Child Safety, Economic Security, Education and Health Services; Child Care Resource and Referral; Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System; and the U.S. Census Bureau. We also want to thank parents and caregivers, local departments and service providers and members of the public who provided local data, attended regional council meetings and voiced their opinions, as well as all the organizations working to transform the vision of the regional council into concrete programs and services for children and families in the FTF San Carlos Apache Tribe. Lastly, we want to acknowledge the current and past members of the FTF San Carlos Apache Regional Partnership Council whose vision, dedication and passion have been instrumental in improving outcomes for young children and families within the region. As we build upon those successes, we move ever closer to our ultimate goal of creating a comprehensive early childhood system that ensures children throughout Arizona are ready for school and set for life.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

The experiences in the first few years of a child's life lay the foundation for their future. Safe and healthy neighborhood environments, accessible educational opportunities, economically stable families and nurturing social contexts for young children have long-term, positive impacts.¹ This Needs and Assets Report examines the current conditions for young children and their families—including social and economic contexts, early learning systems, education and workforce indicators, health outcomes and supports for children with special needs—in the First Things First (FTF) San Carlos Apache Region.

Sources and Data: The data in this report come from a variety of sources including federal and state agencies and local agencies or service providers. Federal government sources include publicly available data from the 2020 Census and American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates (primarily 2019-2023). Data in this report from the ACS summarize the responses from samples of residents taken between 2019 and 2023. Because these estimates are based on samples rather than the entire population, ACS data should not be considered exact. Estimates for smaller geographies, such as regions or sub-regions, are less accurate than estimates for larger geographies, such as the state, because they are based on smaller sample sizes.

Data were provided to FTF by state, federal and Tribal agencies including the Arizona Department of Health Services (ADHS), the Arizona Department of Economic Security (DES), the Indian Health

Service (IHS) and the Inter Tribal Council of Arizona (ITCA). FTF partnered with the Arizona State University Center for Health Information and Research (CHiR) to create custom tabulations of claims data for young children from the Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System (AHCCCS). FTF strategy data related to quality early education, professional development and home visiting were also provided. In most cases, the data in this report were calculated specifically for the Needs and Assets process and are more detailed than the data that are published by these agencies for the general public. Whenever possible, this report will use data tailored to the region, but in some cases, there are only county-level or statewide data available to report. This report also includes publicly available data for the county and state, including from state agencies such as the Arizona Department of Commerce's Office of Economic Opportunity, Arizona Department of Education (ADE), and the Arizona Department of Child Safety (DCS) semi-annual child welfare reports.

Local data were also requested from multiple San Carlos Apache Departments and programs including: San Carlos Apache Enrollment Office, San Carlos Apache Social Services Department, San Carlos Apache Tribe Early Childhood Program and San Carlos Apache Healthcare Corporation. When more recent data from public, state agency or Tribal datasets were not available, this report cites data from past Regional Needs and Assets Reports for the region.

The data in this report are as complete as possible, but there are cases when data for specific years were unavailable or unable to be reported. State agencies have varying policies about reporting small values. Labels such as <10, <6 or "DS" indicate that a count has been suppressed to protect privacy. When data were not available for a given year or geography, the label "N/A" is used.

Color-coding: This report uses color-coding to indicate the relevant geography for each number or percentage discussed in the text as follows: **San Carlos Apache Region**, **all reservation lands located within Arizona**, **Gila County**, **Graham County**, **Arizona**, and the **U.S.** Additional important numbers in the text that do not correspond to one of these geographies have been **bolded**.

Data Interpretation Session: The data compiled in this report reflect one way of knowing about the status of young children and their families, but local perspectives on what works well and what needs improvement from community experts who live, work and care for children in the region provide another vital source of information about the needs and assets in the region. First Things First Regional Partnership Council members and other key community experts participated in a facilitated data discussion in the beginning of 2026 to review the data included in this report. During this session, participants shared local knowledge and perspectives to help interpret the data and add additional context about the region. These insights are included throughout the report, attributed to "local key informants" and "local community experts."

Limitations: It is important to note the limitations of this style of report for Tribal contexts given the kinds of data that are readily available to include. Many indicators of health, educational and economic wellbeing used in the U.S. are grounded in white Western perspectives and normative baselines that do not reflect Indigenous realities, worldviews or values which are often more holistic and tied to land, culture, language and community. As a result, these indicators may overlook strengths, resilience, and locally defined priorities while emphasizing deficit-based comparisons to non-Indigenous populations.² For example, considerable disparities in which communities reach Healthy People Objectives indicates the need to examine the validity of measures like this for low-income, racially/ethnically diverse and immigrant populations as well as to interpret findings from a sociocultural perspective.³ Wherever possible in this report, locally collected data are included along with publicly available and state agency data, and community interpretation is sought to understand what the data mean within the local context.

Additionally, this report was compiled in the fall of 2025 and spring of 2026 during a time of rapid changes in federal funding and policy. The data presented here reflect a particular moment in time. Where possible, potential impacts of currently known policy decisions grounded in high-quality research have been included, but the full extent of the impact of policies implemented in 2025 and 2026 on early childhood well-being will not be fully clear for years to come. Throughout this report, state-level data is included to help understand how the region is doing in comparison to Arizona overall. For a more comprehensive discussion of needs and assets at the state level, please see the First Things First 2025 Statewide Needs and Assets Report – Building Bright Futures.^a

Analysis of data and reporting of findings contained in this report were completed by Kara Habersstock Tanoue, Rachel Leih, Madeleine deBlois, Deirdre Avery, Vicki Brown, Terrace Ewinghill, Rachel Gildersleeve, Anvi Bhakta, Beatriz Reyna, Deshawna Yazzie, April Horne, Lauren Moxley, Dora Valencia, Claudia Vega and Felicia Zhang from the Community Research, Evaluation & Development (CRED) team in the John and Doris Norton School of Human Ecology at the University of Arizona.

^a The full report can be found at <https://www.firstthingsfirst.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-State-Needs-and-Assets-Report.pdf>

THE SAN CARLOS APACHE REGION

The First Things First regional boundaries were initially established in 2007, creating 31 regions which were designed to (a) reflect the view of families in terms of where they access services, (b) coincide with existing boundaries or service areas of organizations providing early childhood services, (c) maximize the ability to collaborate with service systems and local governments and facilitate the ability to convene a Regional Partnership Council and (d) allow for the collection of demographic and indicator data. The regional boundaries are reviewed every two years. In state fiscal year 2015, the boundaries were modified using census blocks, creating 28 regions.

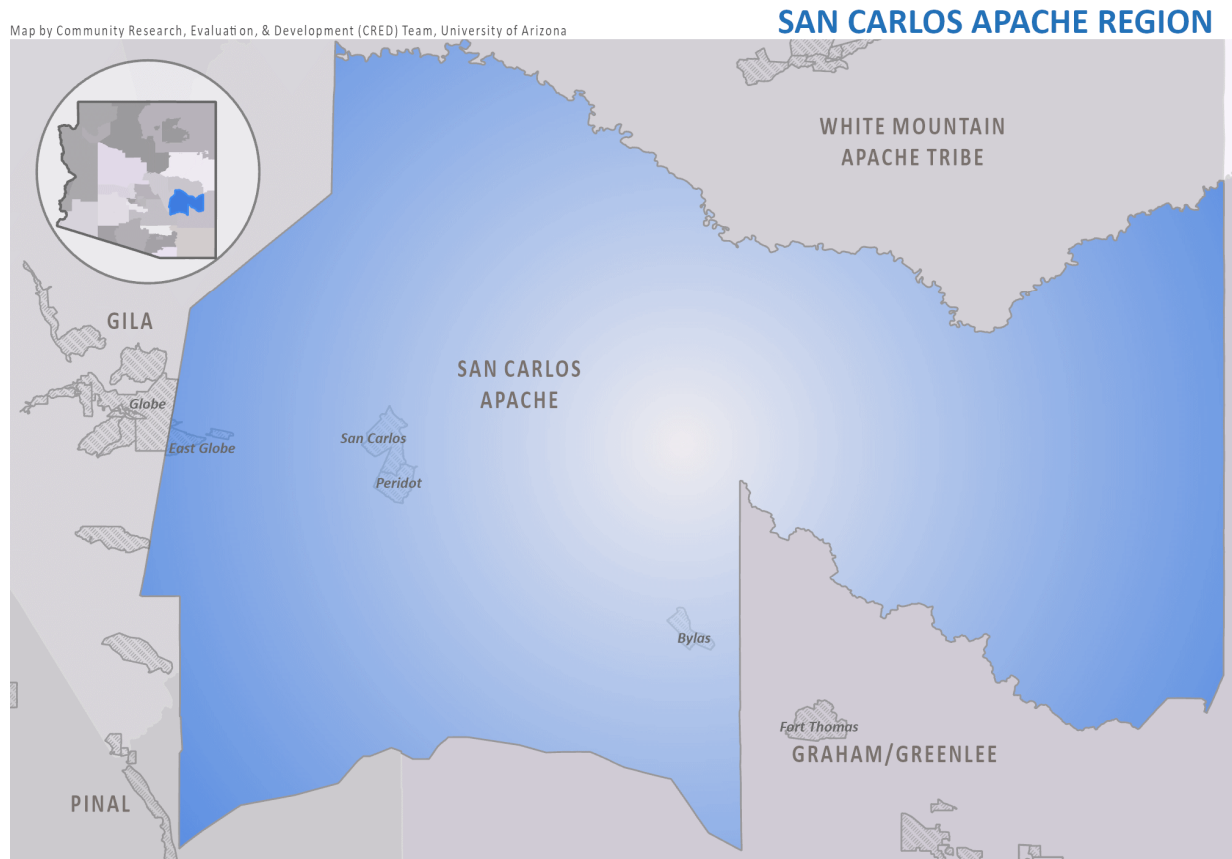
When First Things First was established by the passage of Proposition 203 in November 2006, the government-to-government relationship with federally recognized Tribes was acknowledged. Each Tribe with Tribal lands located in Arizona was given the opportunity to participate within a First Things First designated region or elect to be designated as a separate region. The San Carlos Apache were one of 10 Tribes that chose to be designated as its own region. This decision must be ratified every two years, and the San Carlos Apache Tribe has opted to continue to be designated as its own region.

The boundaries of the First Things First San Carlos Apache Region are the same as the San Carlos Apache Indian Reservation. The region covers almost 3,000 square miles in east-central Arizona. Most of the region lies within Gila and Graham Counties, although there is a small, uninhabited section in Pinal County. The reservation, which was established in 1871, is divided into four districts: Seven Mile Wash, Gilson Wash, Peridot and Bylas.

The map that follows shows the geographical area covered by the San Carlos Apache Region. Additional information is available at the end of this report, including a map and table of the region's zip codes and a map of Arizona public school districts in the region in the *Maps & Methods* Appendix.

First Things First 2026 Needs and Assets Report

The First Things First San Carlos Apache Region



Source: 2020 TIGER/Line Shapefiles prepared by the U.S. Census. Map produced by CRED. Please note that all labels in this map refer to First Things First (FTF) regions, including the San Carlos Apache Region and neighboring FTF regions: the Pinal, Gila, Graham/Greenlee and White Mountain Apache Tribe regions.

FAMILY, CHILD & COMMUNITY CHARACTERISTICS

Young children in the region

While young children make up a small proportion of the overall population, their well-being has wide-reaching impacts on families, social service systems and the state's future population. Continued investment in children's well-being and the well-being of their families has been deemed by the National Academy of Sciences as "the most efficient strategy" for strengthening the future workforce and supporting a thriving community.^{4, 5} According to the 2020 Census, the San Carlos Apache Region was home to about **1,192** young children birth to age 5. Another way to estimate the number of young children in the region is birth certificate data from the Arizona Department of Health Services (ADHS). Between 2018 and 2023, **1,060** children were born in the San Carlos Apache Region, declining from a high of **199** births in 2019 to a recent low of **146** in 2023.^b Local key informants felt that births have likely continued to decline and are matched by lower enrollment in the local school district. Statewide, births have also been on a downward trend.

The 2020 Census faced major challenges during the data collection process, which led to an undercount of the population identifying as American Indian living on reservations and young children birth to age 4.⁶ Tribal enrollment data provide a vital source of information about the population in the region as well as eligibility for certain resources and programs. According to the San Carlos Apache Enrollment Office, there were **17,519** enrolled San Carlos Apache members in 2025, an increase from 2024 (n = **17,386**). However slightly fewer members were residing on reservation lands in 2025 (**11,379**) than in 2024 (n = **11,469**), including young children birth to age 5 specifically (**505** compared with **644**).⁷ The overall number of young children enrolled in San Carlos Apache, both on- and off-reservation, was also slightly lower in 2025 (n = **871**) compared to 2024 (n = **903**), though this number has fluctuated in recent years based on data from 2020 (n = **958**) and 2021 (n = **724**).^{8, 9} The number of enrolled young children living on-reservation is less than half the number of births between 2018 and 2023. Local community experts indicated that families may find the enrollment process burdensome and only enroll their children in order to access key services that require it.

^b Note that births are assigned to the region based on the address that parents list on the birth certificate form. This means that babies born to families residing in the region should be counted in regional birth numbers regardless of the location of the hospital where they were born.

Figure 1.

Young children in the region

The San Carlos Apache Region is home to

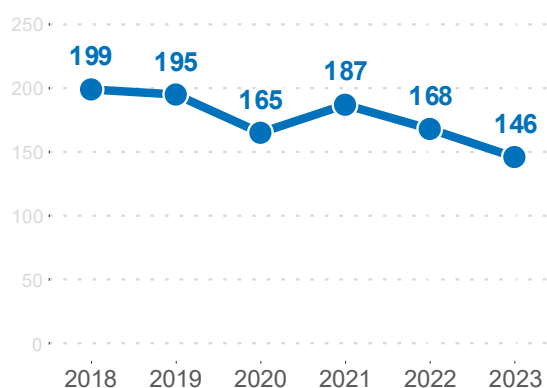
1,192

children birth to age 5 (2020)¹

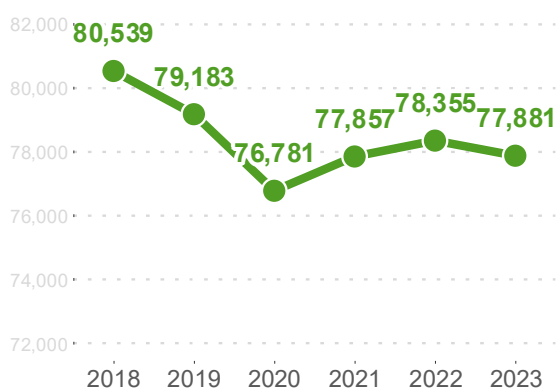


Number of births per calendar year²

San Carlos Apache Region



Arizona



San Carlos Apache Enrollment (2025)

	On-reservation	Off-reservation	Total
Children birth to age 5	505	366	871
Birth to age 2	116	181	297
Age 3	131	57	188
Age 4	138	70	208
Age 5	120	58	178
School-age (ages 6-17)	2,833	995	3,828
Total Enrollment	11,379	6,140	17,519

¹ U.S. Census Bureau. (2023). 2020 Decennial Census, Demographic and Housing Characteristics (DHC).

² Arizona Department of Health Services. (2024). [Vital Statistic dataset].

³ San Carlos Apache Enrollment Office. (2025). [Enrollment dataset].

Characteristics of young children and the population

According to the 2020 Census, the San Carlos Apache Region had a total population of **10,251** people living in **2,387** households. About one in three households (**31%**) in the region included a young child birth to age 5, a higher proportion of households than across all reservation lands located within Arizona (**20%**), Gila County (**10%**), Arizona (**13%**) and nationally (**13%**).

Understanding the racial-ethnic composition of communities can inform efforts to ensure equitable access to services and resources. According to the 2020 Census, nearly all San Carlos Apache Region residents identified as American Indian (**99%** of the total population, **99%** of young children birth to age 4). These proportions were higher than those living on reservation lands located within Arizona (**95%** of young children and **93%** of the total population).¹⁰

Native languages provide an important connection to family, community and culture. Language preservation and revitalization are crucial for safeguarding traditional knowledge and promoting Indigenous self-determination, social unity and educational equity.^{11, 12} One in three (**33%**) residents ages 5 and older in the San Carlos Apache Region reported speaking “another language” at home, most likely a Native North American language such as Apache, according to data from the 2023 American Community Survey (ACS).^c This proportion is lower than for residents living on reservation lands located within Arizona, where nearly half (**49%**) spoke “another language”.¹³

There are a number of Apache language revitalization efforts geared towards young children in the community. Both the San Carlos Apache Head Start and Early Childhood Education Programs integrate language and culture into their lessons. Additionally, the San Carlos Unified School District recently expanded its kindergarten and 1st grade language immersion program to include Apache instruction for all grades including preschool. Each school site has an Apache language teacher, and all teachers (including non-Native teachers) receive cultural and language training through the Apache Language Preservation Program. First Things First also funds Gowa: Teachable Moments for Apache Children, an early literacy program rooted in the Apache language and culture which hosts family activities and provides books and other literacy resources in both English and Apache. Local community experts noted that this program represents a cultural shift around early literacy in the community, with families now regularly taking their children to story time. Finally, the Izee Baa’ Gowah San Carlos Apache Healthcare Corporation employs patient ambassadors who can provide translation assistance to those who would prefer to speak Apache.¹⁴

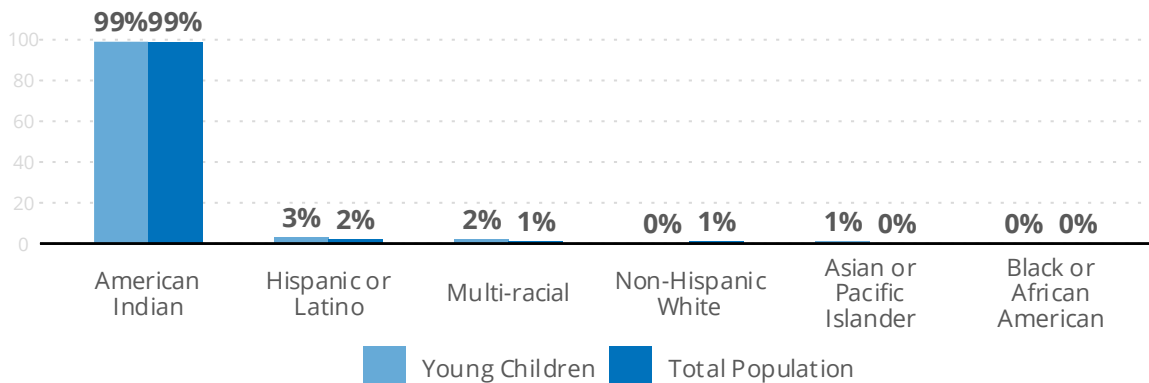
^c The American Community Survey (ACS) no longer specifies the proportion of the population who speak Native North American languages for geographies smaller than the state. In Arizona, Navajo and other Native American languages (including Apache, Hopi, and O’odham) are the most commonly spoken languages (1.4%) besides English (74%) and Spanish (20%)

Figure 2.

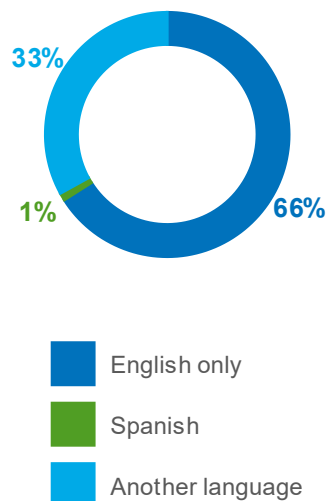
Characteristics of young children and the population

10,251 people live in the San Carlos Apache Region (2020)¹

Race and ethnicity in the San Carlos Apache Region (2020)¹

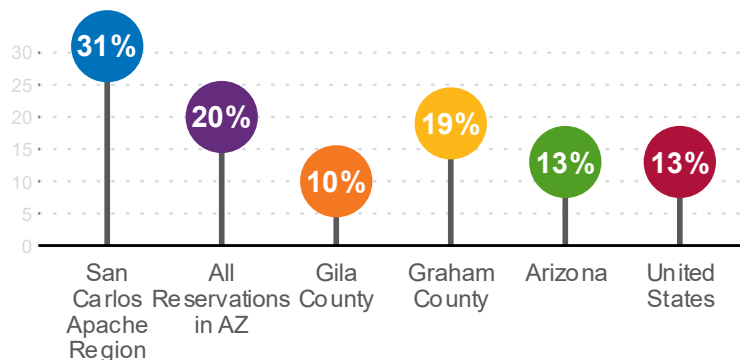


Language spoken at home in the region (2023)²



The San Carlos Apache Region has 2,387 households (2020)¹

Households with young children (2020)¹



¹ U.S. Census Bureau. (2023). 2020 Decennial Census, Demographic and Housing Characteristics (DHC).

² U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2023 American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates, 2019-2023.

Notes: Race and ethnicity data are non-exclusive, meaning that individuals are counted in each category in which they identify. Language data are for the population ages 5 and older. The American Community Survey (ACS) no longer specifies the proportion of the population who speak Native North American languages for geographies smaller than the state. In Arizona, Navajo and other Native American languages (including Apache, Hopi, and O'odham) are the most commonly spoken (2%), following English (73%) and Spanish (20%).

Caregivers for young children

Though varying from one community to another, multigenerational households and kinship care are common in Native communities.^{15, 16} The strengths associated with the extended family structure, including mutual help and respect, can provide family members with a network of support that can be valuable when dealing with socio-economic hardships.^{17, 18} According to the 2023 American Community Survey (ACS), about one in four (**26%**) children birth to age 5 in the San Carlos Apache Region lived with two married parents, similar to the proportion in all reservation lands within Arizona (**27%**).¹⁹ Young children in the region were slightly less likely to reside with one unmarried parent^d (**59%**) than children across all reservation lands in the state (**63%**) and slightly more likely to live with non-parental relatives, such as grandparents, aunts or uncles (**15%** and **11%**, respectively).

An estimated **43%** of young children in the San Carlos Apache Region lived in a grandparent's household as of the 2020 Census, mirroring all reservations in Arizona (**43%**).^e Grandparents can be central to multigenerational households and vital caregivers for children,²⁰ in many cases sharing and strengthening Native language, history and culture.^{21, 22} In the San Carlos Apache Region, there were **255** grandparents who reported that they were responsible for one or more grandchildren age birth to 17 according to the 2023 ACS. Local key informants confirmed that multigenerational living provides more opportunities for young children and even their parents to hear the Apache language and learn traditional teachings from elders. Additionally, grandparents often support their grandchildren's health and educational needs, but they may encounter barriers if they do not have legal guardianship. For example, a legal custodian usually needs to be present at clinic visits. Grandchildren in the custody of grandparents with limited financial means sometimes qualify for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or other benefits, however grandparents may face other challenging financial, legal, and family dynamics if they do seek custody.

Participation in the labor force can impact families in ways that affect children's health and well-being. For example, unemployment can limit access to resources that support children's physical and mental health.²³ An estimated **73%** of young children birth to age 5 in the San Carlos Apache Region lived in families with at least one parent in the labor force. Most (**62%**) young children in

^d The term "parent" includes stepparents. Please note that due to the way the ACS asks about family relationships, children living with two unmarried, cohabitating parents are not counted as living with two parents (these children are counted in the 'one parent' category).

^e Note that in most of these cases, a parent is also present in the household. These data reflect the prevalence of multigenerational households.

the region lived with all parents in the labor force, making it likely that these families need some form of child care.

Income and poverty among families with children

Poverty is associated with reduced access to nutrition, green space and health care and greater exposure to psychosocial stress and environmental toxins; together, these factors may have implications for children's growth and brain development.^{24, 25, 26} Economic circumstances in Tribal communities have been shaped by a long history of inequitable policies and federal disinvestment.^{27, 28} The resulting economic disparity between Native and non-Native communities affects rates of employment, poverty, food security and housing stability. In 2025, a family of two adults and two children was considered to be in poverty if their income fell below \$32,150, while for a single parent with one child it was \$21,150.²⁹ According to the 2023 American Community Survey (ACS), more than half (**54%**) of children birth to age 5 in the San Carlos Apache Region lived in poverty, a decrease from the region's poverty rate in the 2018 ACS (**61%**). This mirrored declining young child poverty rates across all reservation lands in Arizona (**52%** to **44%**), in Gila County (**46%** to **31%**), Graham County (**36%** to **17%**) and statewide (**25%** to **18%**). This decrease in poverty rates is understood to be related to expanded unemployment benefits and child tax credits related to COVID relief funds.³⁰ Despite this decrease, poverty remains a prevalent issue in the community with far-reaching impacts. Local key informants shared that a cross-sector coalition has been focused on social services and addressing poverty in the region, building a system of support in recent years. Additionally, Abiding Ministries provides food and construction services as well as counseling, spiritual guidance, retreats and community events.^f

Consistent with higher poverty rates, median incomes for families in the San Carlos Apache Region were lower than those statewide. The median income for families with children in the region (**\$50,269**) was just over half that of the median income for families statewide (**\$89,366**). This is specifically reflective of the notable gap in income between married couples with children in the region (**\$67,853**) versus the state (**\$116,574**). In contrast, single-female-headed families with children in the region (**\$42,690**) earned slightly more than those statewide (**\$41,509**). Local key informants noted this may be attributed to the high number of women in the region working in education and Tribal government positions that earn relatively high wages.

While median family income is a measure of how much families earn, the self-sufficiency standard^g attempts to estimate how much families actually need to earn to fully support

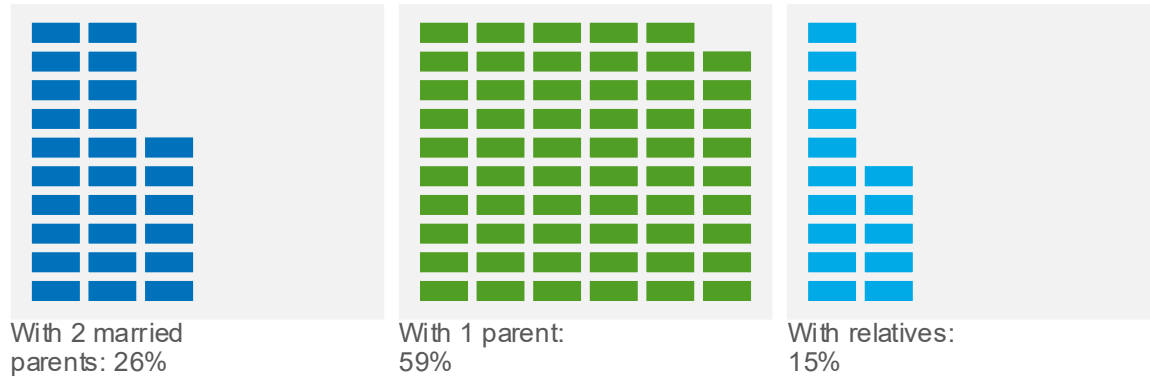
^f For more information about Abiding Ministries, see <https://abidingministriesaz.com/>

^g For more information on the Arizona 2022 Self-sufficiency standard, see https://womensgiving.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/AZ2022_SSS_Web.pdf

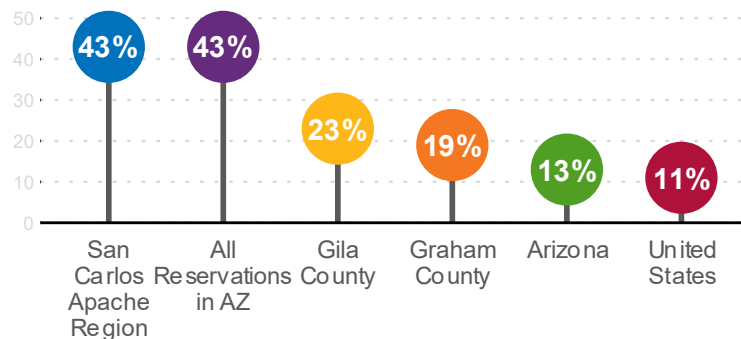
Figure 3.

Caregivers for young children

Living arrangements for children birth to age 5 in the region (2023)¹

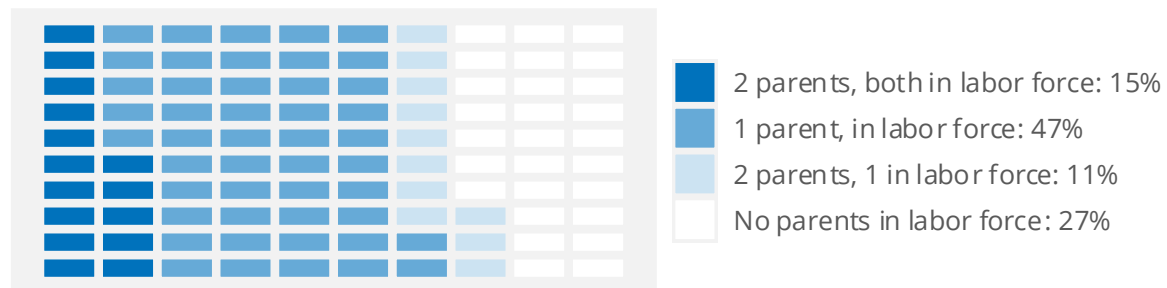


Grandchildren birth to age 5 living in a grandparent's household (2020)²



255
grandparents in the San Carlos Apache Region are responsible for a grandchild (birth to age 17) (2023)¹

Children birth to age 5 by their parent's employment status in the region (2023)¹



¹ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2023 American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates, 2019-2023.

² U.S. Census Bureau. (2023). 2020 Decennial Census, Demographic and Housing Characteristics (DHC).

Notes: The 4 percentages for employment status should sum to 100% but may not because of rounding. The term "parent" here includes stepparents. Due to the way the ACS asks about family relationships, children living with two unmarried, cohabitating parents are not counted as living with two parents (these children are counted in the 'one unmarried parent' category).

themselves. These standards vary by family type and differences in costs of housing, transportation, child care and other budget items across counties and states.^{31, 32} The Arizona self-sufficiency standards were updated in 2025 and reflect a significant increase in the cost of basic needs across Arizona since they were first published in 2002.³³ In 2025, the self-sufficiency standard for two parents, one preschooler and one infant in Gila County was **\$91,884**, a 25.1% increase from 2022 (**\$73,451**).³⁴ The self-sufficiency standard for one parent and one preschooler in Gila County was **\$57,817**, a 18.3% increase from 2022 (**\$48,865**).³⁵ In both cases, the median income in the region was below the self-sufficiency standard, indicating that more than half of married-parent and single-parent families in the county may not be earning enough income to support their families. However, when thinking about the San Carlos Apache Region, it is important to remember that monetary income is one way that families meet their basic needs. In Native communities, subsistence-based activities such as hunting, gathering, farming and ranching are important cultural practices that can also meet families' basic needs and are not captured in standard poverty measures.³⁶ Reservation economies also differ in that a large portion of households rely on home-based enterprises for cash income, with many businesses related to traditional crafts, artistry and food vending.³⁷

When housing costs consume a large percentage of family income, this can result in limited funds for basic needs, such as food and utilities, and can negatively affect young children's development.^{38, 39, 40} Traditionally, housing has been deemed affordable for families if it costs less than 30% of annual household income. According to the 2023 ACS, about one out of every six households (**16%**) in the San Carlos Apache Region was considered housing cost-burdened, slightly higher than the proportion across all reservation lands in Arizona (**14%**) but much lower than the share in Graham County (**21%**), Gila County (**26%**) or Arizona overall (**29%**). Local key informants noted that housing costs are much lower in the region than other municipalities nearby (e.g., Globe), and that most residents receive affordable housing through the Tribe. However some families who would benefit from housing assistance may not meet income eligibility requirements, especially with recent increases to the minimum wage.

The San Carlos Apache Housing Authority, established in 1961, provides affordable housing in the San Carlos Apache Region.^h The Housing Authority offers subsidized rental housing for low-income families under NAHASDAⁱ income guidelines as well as a homebuyer program. The goals of the Housing Authority are to remedy unsafe and unsanitary housing, address the shortage of housing in the community and provide employment opportunities in the construction and maintenance

^h For more information about the San Carlos Apache Housing Authority, see <https://sancarloshousingauthority.org/>

ⁱ For more information about the Native American Housing Assistance and Self-Determination Act, see <https://www.hud.gov/helping-americans/public-indian-housing-nahasda>

trades.⁴¹ Local community experts indicated that poor housing quality and conditions are common, and some lack electricity. To increase the available housing stock, the San Carlos Apache Housing Authority was able to purchase new mobile homes using American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds, and Clayton Homes recently built 8 units. The Tribe is also preparing to move the town of Bylas to higher ground out of the flood zone, including plans to build new homes up an adjacent hill. The San Carlos Unified School District staff shared that it is common for students' families to live "doubled up" with other branches of family while they are on the waitlist for housing or to save on housing costs. The school district receives funds through the McKinney-Vento program to provide additional supports to unhoused students, including those who share housing with others.

Internet access can be a vital utility in homes. Reliable broadband enables access to education, employment, telehealth and social connection, highlighting its importance as a "super determinant" of health.⁴² San Carlos Apache Telecommunications Utility, Inc (SCATUI) serves the Peridot, Seven Mile Wash, Gilson Wash and Bylas Districts and is working towards providing fiber internet connection.^j SCATUI became a "Keep Americans Connected" provider in 2020, using CARES Act funds to expand broadband access in the region.⁴³ In the San Carlos Apache Region, the majority of households with children birth to age 17 (**81%**) had access to a computer and internet service at home. This proportion was much higher than that for children across all reservation lands in Arizona (**67%**) but still lagged behind access for children in Gila County (**87%**) or Graham County (**90%**). According to local key informants, most people in the region access the internet via a smartphone or tablet rather than a desktop or laptop. San Carlos Unified School District also lets children in grades 5 through 12 take school devices home with them.

Food security among young children and families

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for Women, Infants and Children, known as WIC, provides food assistance, breastfeeding support, nutrition education and referral to other health and community services for women and children, starting in pregnancy until children turn age 5.^k WIC, along with other programs like free and reduced-price school meals, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), can be a key resource for low-income families to ensure they have access to affordable, nutritious food that promotes well-being.

Families in Arizona are financially eligible for WIC if their income is at or below 185% of the federal

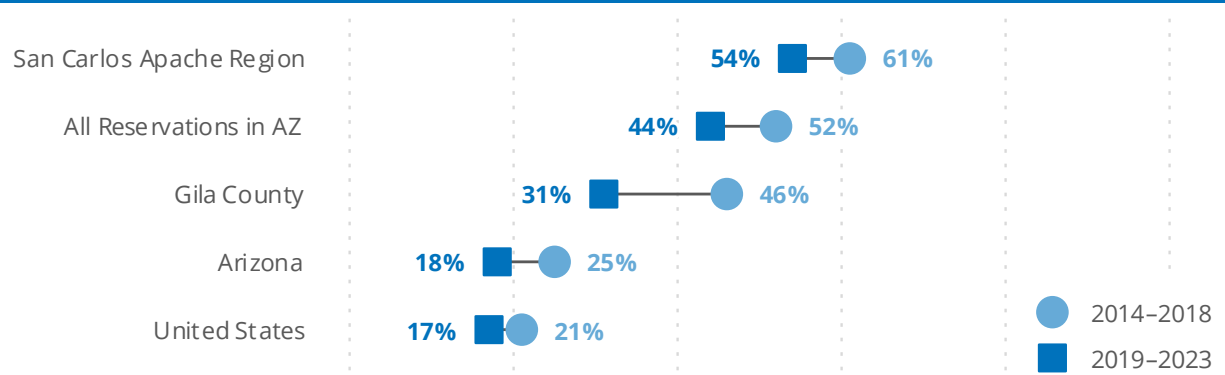
^j For more information about San Carlos Apache Telecommunications Utility, Inc, see <https://scatui.com/>

^k For more information see <https://www.fns.usda.gov/wic>

Figure 4.

Income and poverty among families with children

Change in poverty rates for young children birth to age 5^{1,2}



Self-Sufficiency Standard (2022)³

2 parents, 1 preschooler & 1 infant

\$73,451

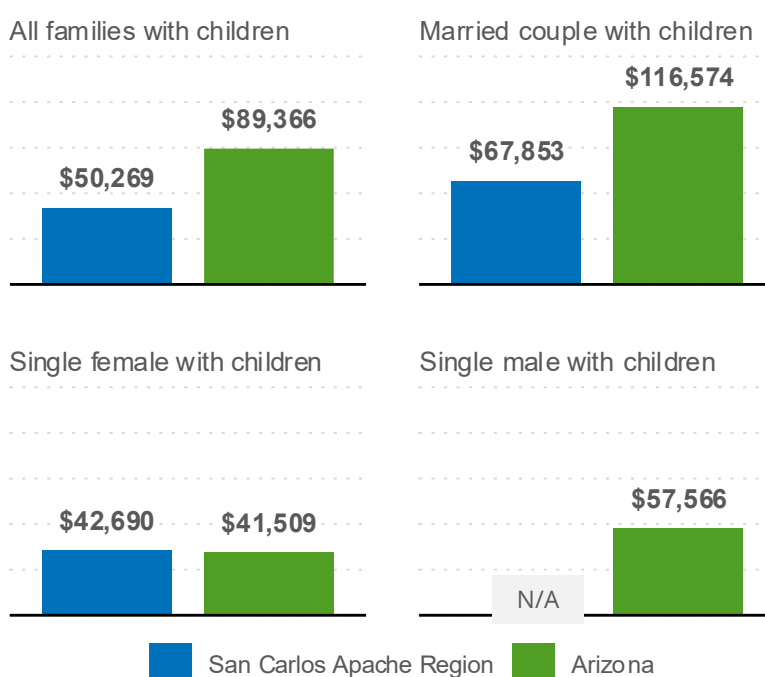
\$70,981

1 parent & 1 preschooler

\$48,865

\$47,892

Median family income for families with children birth to age 17 (2023)²



16% 
of households in the region spend 30% or more of their income on housing (2023)²

81% 
of children under age 18 in the region have a computer and internet access at home (2023)²

¹ U.S. Census Bureau. (2020). American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, 2014-2018.

² U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, 2019-2023.

³ Kucklick, A., Manzer, L., and Mast, A.. (2022). [The Arizona 2022 Self-Sufficiency Standard].

Note: Median income data for single male-headed families was not available for the region from the ACS due to small sample sizes.

poverty level.^{1, 44} In the San Carlos Apache Region there were **702** children birth to age 5 living in households with qualifying incomes for WIC according to the 2023 American Community Survey (ACS). This equates to more than two out of every three (**68%**) young children in the region. The region had a larger proportion of young children whose households financially qualified for WIC compared to the state (**38%**) and Gila County (**56%**) but aligned with young children across all reservations in Arizona (**69%**).

The San Carlos Apache WIC program is administered by the Inter Tribal Council of Arizona. Between 2021 and 2025, the number of caseloads for San Carlos Apache WIC steadily decreased from a high of **1,102** in 2021 to a low of **978** in 2025. Average monthly caseloads in 2025 were highest for children ages 1 to 4 (n = **696**), followed by infants (n = **150**) and women (n = **132**). The decrease in WIC caseloads may reflect the declines in the young child population in the region (discussed previously) more than a decrease in need, given the persistently high rates of poverty.

Families' neighborhood environments also influence their access to affordable, nutritious food. Low-income, low-access areas, also known as "food deserts," are geographic areas with limited access to supermarkets with fresh food options, a challenge often compounded by limited access to adequate transportation.⁴⁵ The U.S. Department of Agriculture most recently mapped these areas in 2019, and based on these maps, **50%** of children birth to 5 in the San Carlos Apache Region lived in a food desert (compared to only **15%** statewide).⁴⁶ This challenge in accessing stores may contribute to the low redemption of grocery benefits among WIC participants (**54.5%**), as there are limited options for redeeming benefits in the region.

Many programs in the San Carlos Apache Region play a role in supporting food security. San Carlos Unified School District provides meals to all students age 18 and under, including on weekends and over the summer. Evening parenting classes usually serve meals, which become even more vital towards the end of the month when other benefits may have been used up. Abiding Ministries provides weekly food (serving over 600 families in 2021), and food boxes or deliveries are also available through the San Carlos Apache Food Distribution Program.

Furthermore, two programs are working to reconnect San Carlos Apache people with their foodways and increase food sovereignty. The Nalwoodi Denzhone Community program grows traditional foods and pasture- raised poultry and eggs in its regenerative market garden and also hosts community events and provides youth education and internship opportunities. Through local partnerships, the program distributes its products to each district on the Reservation through the Food Distribution Program and United Food Bank, and it also supplies San Carlos

¹ In 2026, the 185% FPL threshold was \$61,050 for a family of four and \$40,034 for a family of two. For more information, see <https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/b1bfa16b20ae9b89d525bc35de7c1643/detailed-guidelines-2026.pdf>

Apache Healthcare Corporation's "Food is Medicine" initiative and nutrition services.^m Second, the Traditional Western Apache Diet Project has documented and studied the benefits of traditional Apache foodways including foraging, and it guides Tribal members to reconnect with these foods and practices to support cultural, spiritual, mental and physical healing.⁴⁷

Child maltreatment response and family support

Traumatic or stressful life events experienced in childhood, referred to as Adverse Childhood Experiences or ACEs,ⁿ can have lasting impacts on health and life trajectory beyond childhood, with risk increasing as an individual's number of adverse childhood experiences increases.⁴⁸ In situations where the harm in remaining with their family is determined to be too great to a child, they may be removed from their home, either temporarily or permanently. In accordance with the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 (ICWA), nearly all Tribal governments set their own child welfare laws and manage their own child welfare systems.⁴⁹ Child welfare services in the San Carlos Apache Region are provided by the San Carlos Apache Social Services Department, which houses Tribal Child Protective Services (CPS). Tribal CPS takes reports of child abuse and neglect, investigates these reports and determines if a child needs to be removed from their family to keep them safe.

The number of children removed by CPS increased from **80** in 2019 to **95** in 2020, while the number of substantiated cases of child abuse or neglect increased from **45** to **59**.⁵⁰ The department provided updated estimates for 2025, which have continued to increase since 2020.^o Local key informants shared that issues of child abuse and neglect in the community have reached the forefront in recent years, especially following the case of missing San Carlos Apache teenager Emily Pike in 2025.⁵¹ With the greater recognition of the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) crisis, the Tribe is seen to be prioritizing child welfare cases.

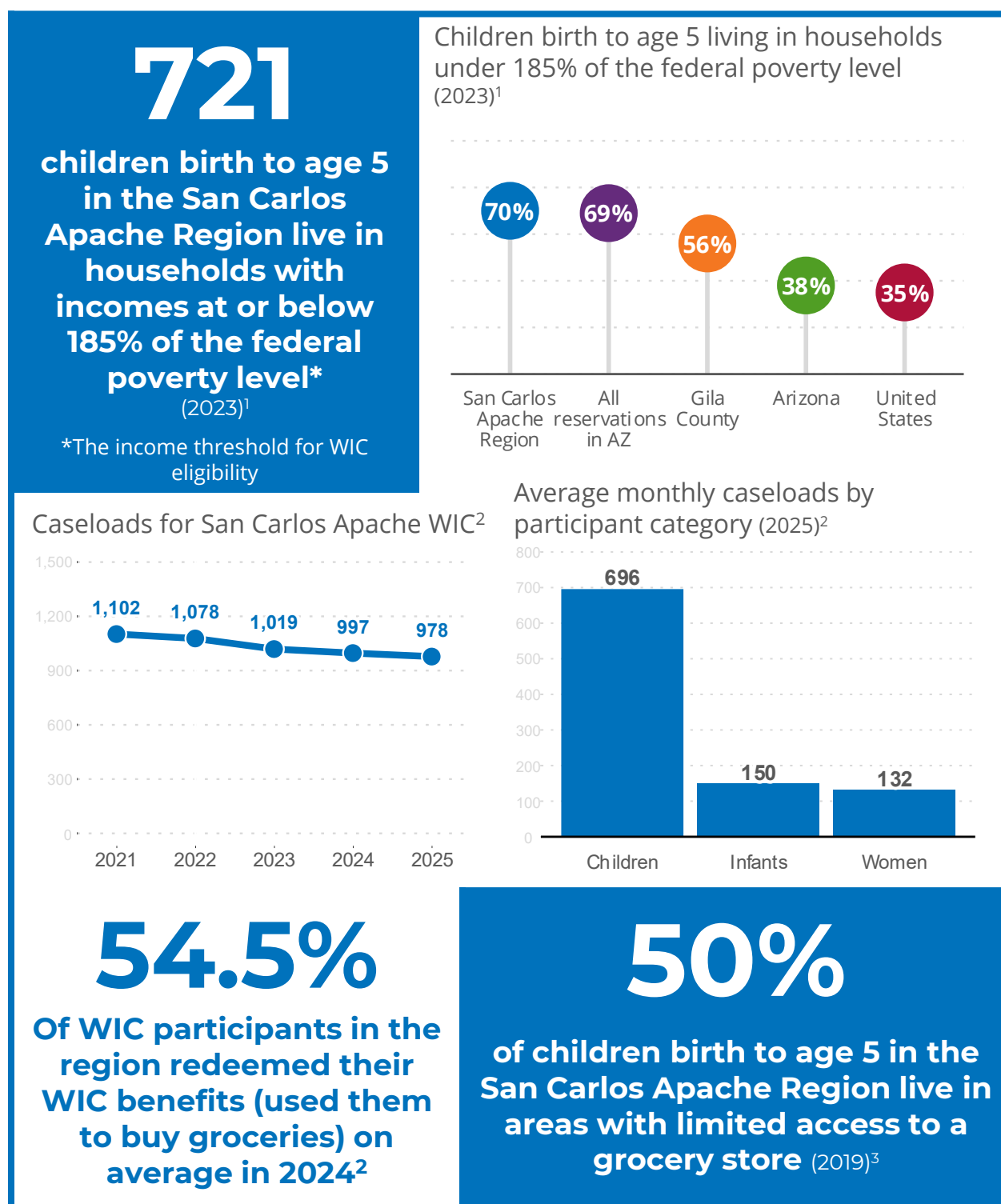
^m For more information about Nalwoodi Denzhone Community, see <https://www.apachencdc.org/>

ⁿ Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) include eight categories of traumatic or stressful life events experienced before the age of 18 years. The eight ACE categories are sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, household adult mental illness, household substance abuse, domestic violence in the household, incarceration of a household member, and parental divorce or separation.

^o The 2025 data from San Carlos Apache Social Services were obtained through an interview, and exact numbers were not available to be included in this report.

Figure 5.

Food security among young children and families



¹ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2023 American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates, 2019-2023.

² Inter Tribal Council of Arizona. (2025). [WIC dataset].

³ Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2022). Food Access Research Atlas.

In previous years, key informants noted significant challenges facing the Social Services Department, including funding and staffing. However, the department also prioritized prevention, rehabilitation and family unity by providing parenting education and counseling, referrals to other community resources as well as transportation services and incentives for completing courses.⁵² For cases where children do need to be removed, the department prioritized family placements where possible. Among children birth to age 17 placed in out of home care by Tribal Social Services in 2025, the vast majority were placed with relatives. Children birth to age 17 who were not placed with relatives were placed in a group home or residential facility or in Tribal foster homes.

Home visitation programs are a proven strategy for equipping families with needed resources and referrals to promote healthy child development, reduce parental stress and prevent future child maltreatment.^{53, 54, 55, 56} In state fiscal year 2025, **41** families in the San Carlos Apache Region participated in home visitation programs, including the Family Spirit, Healthy Families AZ and High-Risk Perinatal Program.

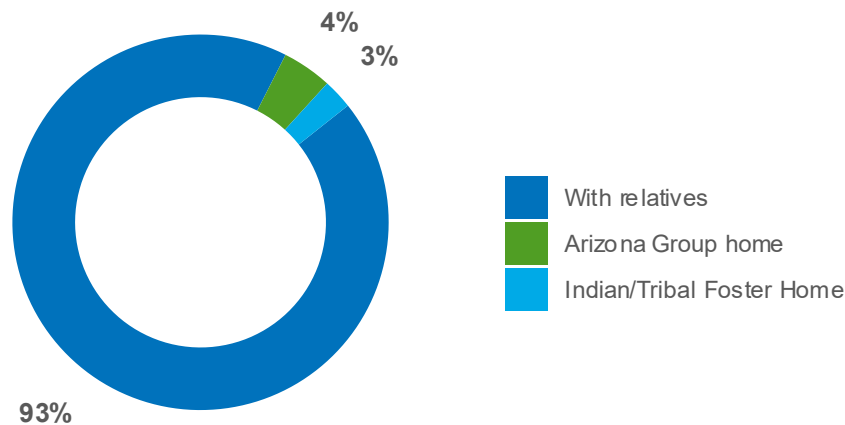
Figure 6.

Child maltreatment response and family support

Tribal Social Services¹

	2019	2020
Substantiated cases of child abuse or neglect ¹	45	59
Children (birth to age 17) removed by Tribal CPS ¹	80	95

Type of placement for children (birth to age 17) in out of home care (2025)¹



41

families in the region
participated in home
visitation programs
(2025)³



¹ First Things First. (2022). 2022 First Things First San Carlos Apache Regional Needs & Assets report

² San Carlos Apache Social Services Department. (2025). [Child welfare interview].

³ First Things First. (2025). [Home Visitation & Screenings Reach datasets].

Note: *Social services data were provided as rough averages for 2025 based on an interview with Social Services staff. These data may not be directly comparable to numbers received in past RNA cycles. Home visitation program data reflects families in the Family Spirit, Healthy Families AZ and High-Risk Perinatal Program. Families may participate in more than one program (and be counted more than once).

EARLY LEARNING

Availability of quality early care and education

Participating in quality preschool programs can result in between one-third and a full year of additional early learning gains in language, reading and math skills, increasing the academic readiness of children when they enter kindergarten.⁵⁷ Families in the San Carlos Apache Region can access early care and education services through the San Carlos Apache Early Childhood Program, which runs the Apache Kid Child Care, San Carlos Apache Head Start, and San Carlos Apache Early Head Start programs at five locations across the region (San Carlos, Indian Hill, Gilson Wash, Peridot, and Bylas).^p Recently, the Early Head Start moved from its Seven Mile location into a new building co-located with the Early Childhood Education Program in San Carlos. School-based preschool is offered at Rice Elementary, a local public school in the San Carlos Unified School District. This program operates as an inclusive preschool serving both typically developing children and children with special needs.

In 2024,^q a total of **318** young children (birth to age 5) were enrolled in early care and education centers in the region, including **54** children birth to age 2 and **264** children ages 3 to 5. Based on the 2020 Census estimate, this equates to about **27%** of the young children in the region enrolled, with the majority of these attending San Carlos Apache Head Start (n = **201**) or Early Head Start (n = **75**). **Fewer than 10** children age birth to 2 and **18** children ages 3 to 5 were enrolled in the San Carlos Apache Early Childhood Program in federal fiscal year 2024, and another **20** children ages 3 to 5 were attending the Rice Elementary Preschool Program in the 2024-25. Families also commonly rely on grandparents for child care or other family, friends, and neighbors (FFN) both on and off the reservation.

An area is labeled a child care desert if there are three times as many children as there are available child care slots (a ratio of **3.0** or more),⁵⁸ an issue for many communities in both urban and rural areas of Arizona.^{59, 60, 61} The San Carlos Apache Region has an overall ratio of **3.8** children birth to age 5 per available slot, which is higher than the ratio for children statewide (**2.0**) and means that the region can be considered a child care desert.⁶² Slots are more readily available for preschool-age children (ages 3 to 5, **2.6**) than for infants and toddlers (birth to age 2, **9.5**). As of November 2025, with the opening of the new child care center, there were **fewer than 10** infants and toddlers on the waitlist for the San Carlos Apache Early Childhood program. Local community experts indicated that both enrollment in the preschool and the waitlist are lower than they have

^p For more information, visit: <https://scatearlychildhoodprograms.com/>

^q Please note that Rice Elementary provided enrollment data for the 2024-25 school year.

been in the past, however more families would use infant and toddler care if it were available and affordable. The primary barrier to increasing this capacity has been staffing.

One way that the quality of early child care and education is measured in Arizona is through the Quality First (QF) program.⁶³ The QF program rates child care providers and preschools on a scale from one to five stars, with “high quality” providers receiving a 3-star rating or higher.⁶⁴ All early care and education providers in the San Carlos Apache Region are enrolled in QF, with all but one receiving a high quality ranking. Head Start programs nationally are also widely acknowledged to meet high quality standards, with rigorous program requirements for curriculum and teacher certification, a research-based national framework for early learning outcomes and regular assessments of quality using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS).^{65 66} Head Start programs across the state of Arizona, including those that are Tribally-operated, had average CLASS scores that exceeded both national averages and research-based thresholds for quality.⁶⁷ This means that **95%** of enrolled young children were in a high quality program, a significant asset in the region.

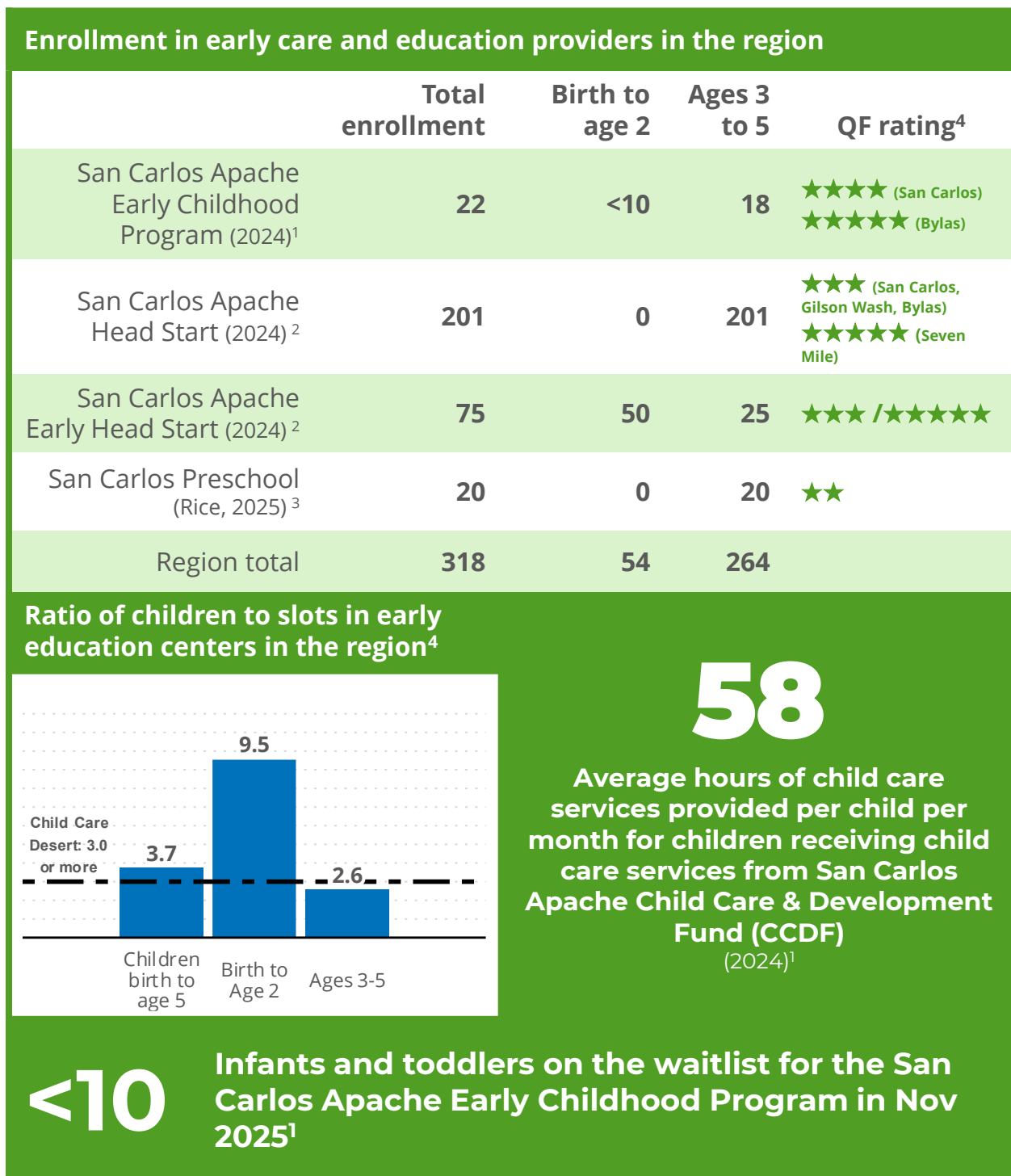
Cost of early care and education

The cost of formal early care and education can be a determining factor in whether families access care for their children. Several factors contribute to the affordability of child care in the region, including child care assistance offered through the San Carlos Apache Kid Child Care & Development Fund (CCDF) and free enrollment at San Carlos Apache Head Start and Early Head Start. Head Start and Early Head Start have consistently had the highest enrollments in the region, accounting for 93% of enrollment in Tribally-operated early care and education programs in 2024. In school year 2024-25, **18** children ages 1 to 13 were receiving care using CCDF support (**9** children ages 1 to 5), with the reason for this care being working parents (**100%**). The average co-pay for families receiving child care assistance from the San Carlos Apache CCDF program was just under **\$91** per month, corresponding to only **2.2%** of the region’s median family income for families with children. This is far lower than the threshold for affordable child care, which is 7% or less of a family’s income.⁶⁸ An average of **58** hours of child care services were provided monthly to children receiving these funds, which is much less than full-time care.

The Arizona Department of Economic Security (DES) also provides child care assistance to financially eligible families, including specific funding for families involved with the Arizona Department of Child Safety (DCS).⁶⁹ Eligibility for and receipt of DES child care assistance among non-DCS-involved families across Arizona recently reached record highs due to recent statewide

Figure 7.

Availability of quality early care and education



¹ San Carlos Apache Tribe Early Childhood Programs. (2025). [Child care dataset & CCDF program profiles].

² Office of Head Start. (2025). [2022-2024 Program Information Report].

³ Arizona Department of Education. (2025). [October 1 Enrollment, Graduation Rates, Dropout Rates, State Assessment dataset].

⁴ Arizona Department of Health Services. (2025). [Child Care Licensing dataset].

Note: Head Start data reflect federal fiscal years, while school data reflect academic years (e.g. SFY 2025 = the 2024-25 school year).

investments.^{r, 70, 71} However, **fewer than 10** children birth to age 5 and families in the San Carlos Apache Region received DES child care assistance in 2024.⁷² This low participation in DES child care assistance is likely related to the child care assistance provided to families by the San Carlos Apache CCDF program, mentioned above, which covers most of the cost of child care, in addition to the availability of care through Head Start and Early Head Start.

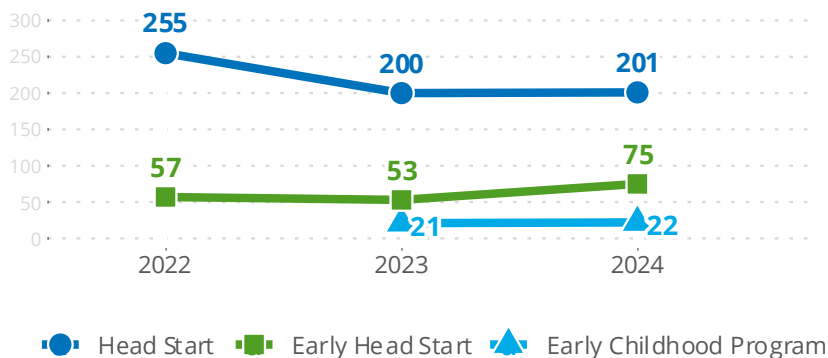
San Carlos Apache region families seeking child care outside of the region may experience significantly higher costs. The average cost of care varies by the type of provider and the age of the child. In Central Arizona (which includes Gila and Pinal counties), family home care had the highest median cost of care for an infant at **\$1,155** per month, only slightly more expensive than licensed centers (**\$1,050**), group homes (**\$1,050**), or public schools (**\$1,040**). The least expensive type of care in the county is in public schools, where the median cost for 1-2-year-olds is **\$872** and 3-5-year-olds is **\$640** per month. Families in the San Carlos Apache Region seeking care outside of the region would pay a minimum of **25%** of the median family income for one infant, followed by **21%** for a young child age 1-2 and **15%** of median income for a child age 3-5. While infant care is still the most expensive in Central Arizona and across the state, the cost of care for 1-2-year-olds increased the most (**+31%**) between 2022 and 2024, followed by 3-5-year-olds (**+24%**) and infants (**+20%**). Key informants indicated that care outside of the region is prohibitively expensive for families and also not widely available outside of informal care arrangements.

^r Unfortunately, due to insufficient funding the DES child care assistance waitlist was reinstituted statewide in August 2024. As of May 1, 2026, there were more than 12,000 children waitlisted statewide. For more information, see <https://des.az.gov/services/child-and-family/child-care/how-apply-for-child-care-assistance>

Figure 8.

Cost of early care and education

Enrollment trends in Head Start & the San Carlos Apache Early Childhood Program^{1,2}

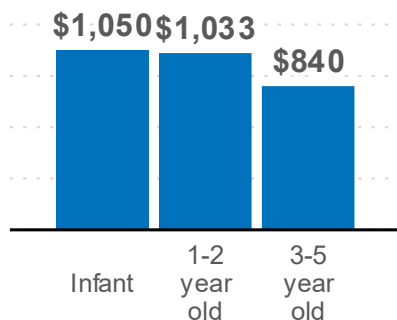


\$90

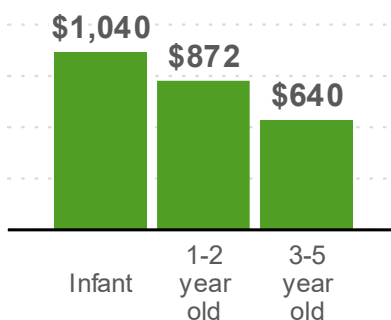
Average monthly co-payment for families receiving child care services from San Carlos Apache Early Childhood Program in FFY 2025¹

Median monthly charge for full-time child care in Central Arizona (2024)³

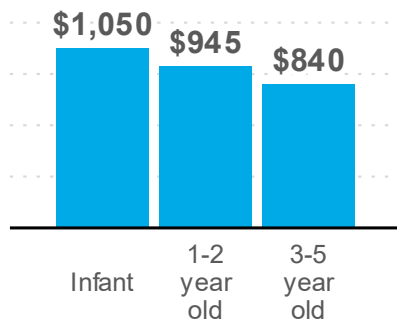
Licensed center



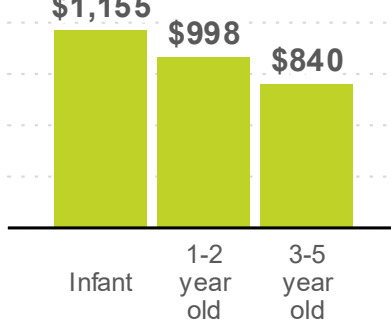
Public school



Group home



Family home



<10

Children in the San Carlos Apache Region receiving AZDES Child Care Assistance in 2024⁴

Change in cost of center-based care from 2022 to 2024 in Central Arizona (2024)³

Infant	+20%
1-2-year-old	+31%
3-5-year-old	+24%

¹ San Carlos Apache Tribe Early Childhood Programs. (2025). [Child care dataset & CCDF program profiles].

² Office of Head Start. (2025). [2022-2024 Program Information Report].

³ Health Management Associates. (2024). 2024 Child Care Market Rate Survey. Arizona Department of Economic Security.

⁴ Arizona Department of Economic Security. (2024). [Child Care Assistance dataset].

EDUCATION & WORKFORCE

K-12 education attendance and achievement

In addition to a quality early childhood education system, a community's K-12 education system can support positive outcomes for children, families and the overall well-being of the community. Individuals who have higher levels of education tend to live longer and healthier lives, and graduating from high school, in particular, is associated with better health, financial stability and socio-emotional outcomes.^{73, 74}

While federal funding makes up a small portion of most U.S. school budgets, school districts on reservation lands rely on additional federal funds to make up for lost local tax revenue, fulfill the U.S. government's obligation to provide Native students with a quality education and close the achievement gap for minority and disadvantaged students.^{75, 76, 77} Despite federal trust obligations, Tribal education systems have been chronically underfunded compared to non-Tribal schools, resulting in inadequate and poorly maintained infrastructure, un-competitive teacher compensation, an inability to modernize and poorer student outcomes.^{78, 79} The COVID-19 pandemic response substantially increased funding distributed to Native Nations and their school systems, however current federal policies have cut or delayed the delivery of federal funds for the 2025-26 school year.^{80, 81, 82} For Native Nations in Arizona, this has already resulted in cutting after-school programs, halting needed construction projects and considering letting staff go or borrowing money to pay salaries.⁸³

The San Carlos Apache Region includes most of the San Carlos Unified School District and Fort Thomas Unified School District. Enrollment in kindergarten through 3rd grade at Rice Elementary School in San Carlos Unified School District has been lower in the years since the COVID-19 pandemic began, fluctuating from a recent high of **481** in the 2019-20 school year to a low of **363** in the 2021-22 school year. Enrollment has declined even more in Fort Thomas Unified School District, dropping from **201** students in 2019-20 and to **152** in 2024-25. Using the 2020 Census population as the denominator, about three-quarters (**78%**) of the potential kindergarten through third graders in the region were enrolled in public schools in these two districts in the 2024-25 school year.⁵ Children living in the region may also attend private schools such as Peridot- Our Savior's Lutheran School and St. Charles Apache Mission School as well as off reservation schools including Globe Unified School District schools and Destiny Charter School.⁸⁴

⁵ This calculation used the 2020 Census estimated number of children under age 1 through age 3 in the region (n = 731), which equates to the estimated number of 5- through 8-year-olds— or possible kindergarten through third graders— in the 2025 school year.

Children's 3rd grade reading comprehension and proficiency skills can predict their future academic success, such as their likelihood of graduating high school and attending college.⁸⁵ From the 2021-22 to 2023-24 school years, the proportion of 3rd graders passing the reading assessment increased slightly from **3%** to **5%** at Rice Elementary in the San Carlos Unified School District but decreased from a higher rate of **20%** down to **8%** in the Fort Thomas Unified School District. Passing rates on the 3rd grade math assessment increased for students in San Carlos Unified School District from **3%** in school year 2021-22 to **10%** in school year 2023-24. In the 2023-24 school year, the math passing rate in San Carlos Unified School District was 11% lower than for American Indian students across Arizona (**21%**), who saw a greater increase in passing rates from school years 2021-22 to 2023-24 (**+13%**). Data for Fort Thomas Unified School District showed that math passing rates increased from **22%** in 2021-22 to **24%** in 2023-24. It is important to note that standardized tests have been found to have lower cultural relevancy to non-White students, which has contributed to a disparity in achievement on standardized tests across racial and ethnic groups.⁸⁶

School attendance, particularly in the early grades, is another important factor in predicting academic performance, school engagement and connectedness. Chronic absenteeism, defined as missing 10% of school days in a school year, can result in a student experiencing academic difficulties and even dropping out of school entirely.⁸⁷ Elementary school absenteeism among Native youth may be influenced by a number of factors including a historically-rooted distrust of educational institutions, low use of culturally-relevant teaching methods and curricula as well as infrastructure-related issues (e.g., road conditions, bus availability and distances to schools).^{88, 89, 90} Chronic absence rates in the San Carlos Apache Region increased drastically after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, but have begun to decline again.[†] In the 2022-23 school year, **68%** of kindergarteners and **58%** of 3rd graders were chronically absent, with this rate decreasing to **52%** of 3rd graders in the 2023-24 school year. Chronic absence rates decreased more steeply in Fort Thomas Unified School District, from **64%** in the 2022-23 school year down to **25.5%** in the 2023-24 school year across both Mt. Turnbull and Fort Thomas Elementary Schools.⁹¹ Across Arizona, chronic absenteeism also increased after the COVID-19 pandemic but was much lower than in the region (at **26%** of kindergarteners in school year 2022-23 and **21%** of 3rd graders in school year 2023-24).⁹² Local community experts listed multiple reasons why absences are high in the region, including homelessness and lack of access to adequate food, water and transportation.

Staff from the San Carlos Unified School District enumerated many ways the district is working to change community perceptions of education, involve families and improve student outcomes. The

[†] Please note that absenteeism was recorded differently in the 2019-20 school year, making the rate look lower compared to other years.

district employs parent educators to act as a bridge between school staff, parents, particularly vulnerable students and other community services. Cultural success coaches work with students to connect them to their Apache identity and reach out to families when needed. They are also working specifically to reduce truancy and have expanded these efforts from the high school to also focusing on middle school students.

Graduation and adult educational attainment

Understanding current high school graduation and dropout rates provides insight into the assets and challenges faced by a community and its future workforce. In contrast to adults who dropped out of high school and even those that received a high school equivalency (HSE) diploma, adults who graduated from high school have higher rates of employment, higher incomes and better overall health.⁹³ Over the most recent years of data, 4- and 5-year graduation rates have been recovering to pre-pandemic levels within the San Carlos Unified School District (USD) and across the state. In school year 2023-24, the four-year graduation rate was **79%** compared with **78%** across the state, and the five-year graduation rate was **82%** compared with **81%**.⁹⁴ Graduation rates remained lower in Fort Thomas USD, which had a four-year graduation rate of **66%** and five-year graduation rate of **71.4%** in the 2023-24 school year.^{u, 95}

In contrast to the U.S. as a whole, Arizona has a larger proportion of disconnected youth, defined as teenagers ages 16 to 19 who are neither attending school nor employed,^v which has been linked to negative physical and mental health outcomes and higher rates of unemployment.⁹⁶ Native youth, both nationally and in Arizona, are disproportionately disconnected and therefore particularly vulnerable to negative outcomes and may need additional outreach and supports.⁹⁷ Dropout rates for 7th to 12th grade students in the San Carlos USD increased steeply from **8%** in the 2019-20 school year to **14%** of students in the 2022-23 school year, but then decreased to **8%** in the 2023-24 school year. Fort Thomas USD had a **7%** dropout rate in school year 2023-24.⁹⁸ Across Arizona, dropout rates also increased from **3%** in school year 2019-20 to **10%** in school year 2021-22 but have since decreased back to **6%** in school year 2023-24.

Education is a key mechanism for upward economic mobility. As educational attainment in a population increases, wages increase and rates of unemployment decrease.⁹⁹ In 2021, median earnings for U.S. adults working full time were \$29,000 higher for those with a bachelor's degree than those with a high school degree.¹⁰⁰ Of adults ages 25 and older in the San Carlos Apache Region, **80%** had at least a high school education and **9%** had either an associate's degree or

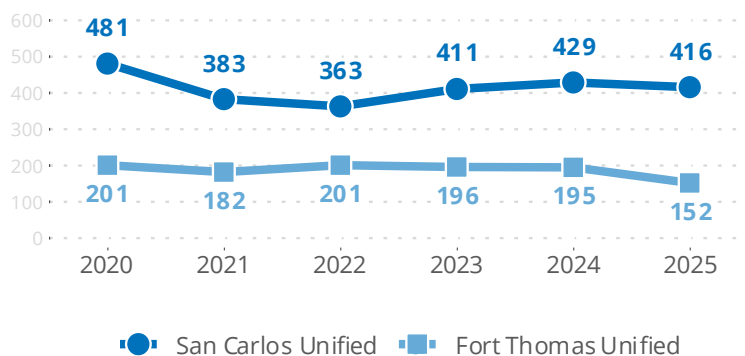
^u Note that Fort Thomas Middle School and Fort Thomas High School are located outside the region.

^v Age ranges used for 'disconnected youth' vary by source, with some estimates including both teenagers ages 16-19 and young adults ages 20-24 and others focusing on only teenagers or young adults.

Figure 9.

K-12 education attendance and achievement

K-3rd grade enrollment in public schools in the region¹

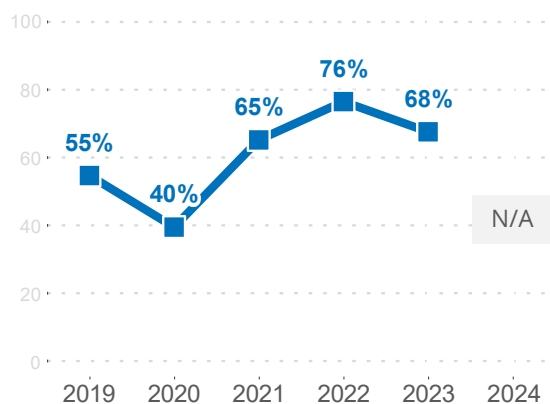


Students passing 3rd grade assessments¹

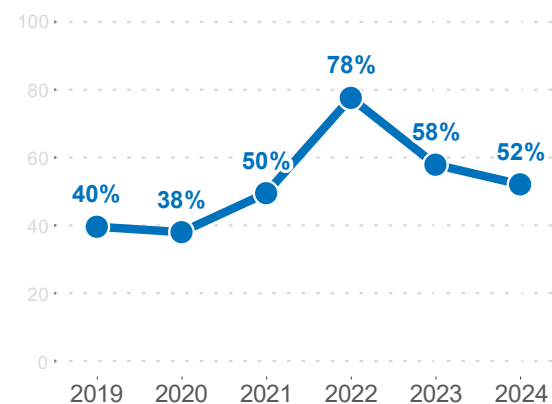
	Math			Reading		
	2022	2024		2022	2024	
San Carlos Unified District	3%	10%	▲	3%	5%	▲
Fort Thomas Unified District	22%	24%	▲	20%	8%	▼
All American Indian students in Arizona	8%	21%	▲	8%	17%	▲
All Arizona students	40%	43%	▲	41%	39%	▼

Chronic absence rates, Rice Elementary School²

Kindergarten



3rd Grade



¹ Arizona Department of Education. (2025). [October 1 Enrollment, Graduation Rates, Dropout Rates, State Assessment dataset].

² Maricopa Association of Governments. (2026). [ReadOn Arizona MapLIT dashboard reports: enrollment, chronic absences, assessments].

Notes: Chronic absences are defined as children missing 10% or more school days. Schools reported absences data very differently in school year 2019-20 due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to remote learning. Absences data were not available for kindergarteners in school year 2023-24.

bachelor's degree or more. This compares with **89%** of Arizona adults with at least a high school education and **33%** with a higher education degree. The **26%** of adults in the region with "some college, no degree" may have a child development associate (CDA) or other credential that takes less than 2 years to complete. There are a number of barriers to Native American students completing higher education degrees, including academic under-preparation, poor financial assistance options, cultural isolation and invalidation, few Native American staff or faculty to act as mentors and familial conflicts about staying in their home community versus leaving for school and career needs.¹⁰¹

Local community experts shared that high school students in the district can enter a dual enrollment program with Gila County and San Carlos Apache College, and the career and technical education (CTE) program is being expanded. The associates degree program at Apache College is also becoming more popular and seeing larger graduating classes. There are local job opportunities such as through Apache College and the health system that require higher degrees, which could provide motivation for youth to continue their education with the right guidance and support and to give back to their community through their careers.

Adult employment

Unemployment and underemployment^w can impact families in ways that affect children's health and well-being.¹⁰² Unemployment can limit access to resources that support children's physical and mental health, like health insurance, and can also contribute to family stress, conflict, homelessness and child abuse.^{103, 104} Children with parents who have lost their jobs may also experience poorer school performance and behavioral issues, resulting in grade repetition, suspension or expulsion.¹⁰⁵ In recent years, data from the Arizona Office of Economic Opportunity indicate that unemployment rates in Gila County have mirrored the state, peaking at **8%** in 2020 related to impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and decreasing to **4%** in 2022 through 2024. Self-report data from the 2023 American Community Survey (ACS) indicated that unemployment rates for the San Carlos Apache Region (**17%**) were higher than across all reservation lands in Arizona (**13%**).

The labor force participation rate includes all persons who are working (employed) or looking for work (unemployed). Persons not in the labor force are largely students, stay-at-home parents, retirees and people who are institutionalized. According to 2023 American Community Survey (ACS) estimates, just under half (**47%**) of the population ages 16 and older was participating in the labor force in the San Carlos Apache Region, which was the same as the estimates for Gila County

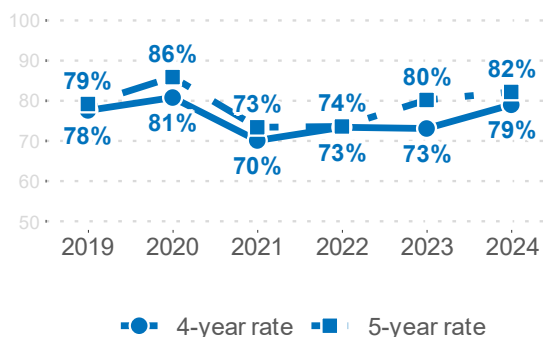
^w Underemployment means that someone works fewer hours than they would like or is in a job that does not require the skills or training that they have.

Figure 10.

Graduation and adult educational attainment

Trends in 4-year and 5-year graduation rates¹

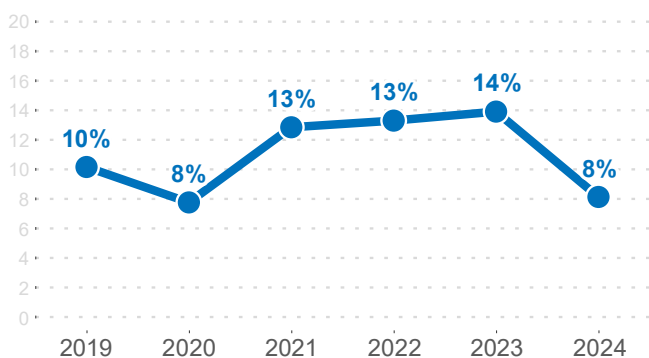
San Carlos Unified District



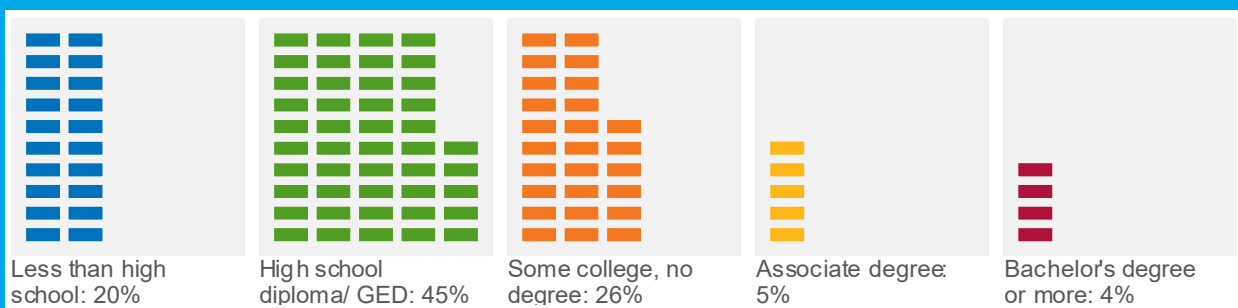
Arizona



Trends in 7th to 12th grade dropout rates, San Carlos Unified District¹



Level of education of adults in San Carlos Apache Region (2023)²



¹ Arizona Department of Education. (2025). [October 1 Enrollment, Graduation Rates, Dropout Rates, State Assessment dataset].

² U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2023 American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates, 2019-2023.

Notes: Graduation rates are calculated as the percentage of students in a cohort (typically those who enter ninth grade together) who graduate within 4 or 5 years. "Dropouts are defined as students who are enrolled in school at any time during the school year, but are not enrolled at the end of the school year and did not transfer, graduate or die" [State of Arizona Department of Education Graduation, Dropout & Persistence Rate Technical Manual].

(47%) but 14% lower than Arizona (61%). The major employers in the region are the San Carlos Apache Tribe Government, San Carlos Apache Healthcare Corporation, Apache Gold & Apache Sky Casinos and San Carlos Unified School District. The San Carlos Apache Tribe Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) was recently able to increase their minimum wage to \$18 per hour, thanks to reimbursement from private and public insurance. While better-paying jobs are certainly an asset in the region, key informants described how increases in the minimum wage can unintentionally strain families. Because of the phenomenon known as the “benefits cliff,” even a small rise in income can make families ineligible for programs such as Tribal housing, food assistance or child care subsidies, and the value of those benefits often exceeds the modest value of the added earnings.

Local key informants felt that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted people’s mental health, wellbeing and drive to participate in in-person work, both in the community and nationally. It is important to note that due to many historical and legal reasons, as well as differences in practical economic structures, employment and labor force participation rates in Native communities can vary greatly from state rates.¹⁰⁶ Recent federal changes may not be helping; an assessment performed by the National Center for American Indian Enterprise Development indicates that federal actions taken in 2025 will negatively impact economic development and growth on Tribal Nations. Impacts include eliminating, decreasing or deprioritizing programs that support small and Indian Country businesses, increasing operational costs related to tariffs and reducing access to jobs in the clean energy, research and public sectors, among others.¹⁰⁷

Quality early care and education programs rely on a strong workforce. In school year 2025-26, 74 staff were employed in early care and education in the San Carlos Apache Region. This includes 2 classroom teachers and 8 teaching assistants in the Early Childhood Program, 11 classroom teachers and 18 teaching assistants in the Head Start Program and 35 Early Head Start classroom teachers. Notably, the majority of staff in these programs held relevant credentials including a Child Development Associate (CDA), associate’s degree (AA), or bachelor’s degree (BA) related to child development and education. Others were enrolled in a relevant education program, which can be paid for by the San Carlos Apache Tribe Education Department. The First Things First San Carlos Apache Regional Partnership Council also funds the College Scholarship Strategy to help individuals working towards a bachelor’s degree, however local key informants indicated that the fund is underused at this time.

Factors like low pay can make it difficult to recruit and retain early childhood educators. Early care and education is also a field with notable pay disparities, with those working as a home care provider, in a Head Start program or a public pre-K program getting paid varying amounts despite

performing similar work.^x For example, the average kindergarten teacher's salary in Arizona is about twice that of an early childhood educator.¹⁰⁸ In Arizona, there were **13,260** early education professionals active in the Arizona Early Childhood Workforce Registry^y in November 2025. The median wage for registered early education professionals in the state was **\$17/hour**, ranging from **\$21.91/hour** for directors to **\$16/hour** for assistant teachers.^z

Regional salary data were only available for the Early Childhood Program, where the teachers and teaching assistants were making between **\$14** and **\$17** per hour. Key informants in the region shared that the program has been advocating for increasing staff pay to meet the new DHHS minimum wage; however other costs and needed improvements to buildings and playgrounds have made it difficult for the Tribal Education Committee to prioritize. Low pay was confirmed to contribute to challenges with recruiting enough teachers to fill all available positions in the region. Credentialing requirements can present an additional hurdle to recruiting staff and, given the shortage of early care and education staff, there is not a substantial incentive for staff to pursue credentials beyond the minimum required. Key informants suggested that community residents may not understand the value of early education and view it as "just babysitting" rather than valuable preparation for school. On the other hand, some parents see classrooms as an inappropriate setting for a young child.

^x Programs such as Head Start and public pre-K programs receive federal funding supports that often allow for better wages and compensation in these settings compared to child care settings that don't receive these funds.

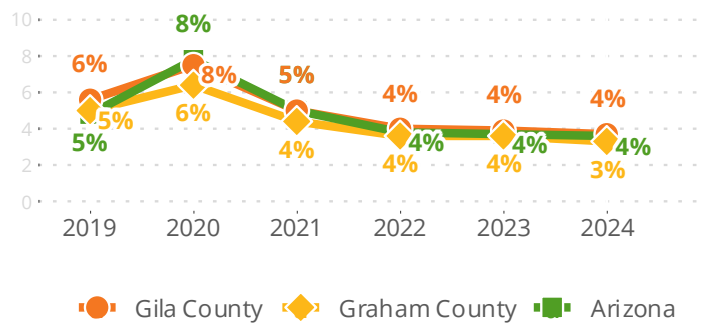
^y The Arizona Early Childhood Workforce Registry is Arizona's online hub for early childhood educators to track their employment, formal education, and professional development opportunities throughout their career. Early childhood educators access the registry to explore a directory of training, conferences, and other learning opportunities to support career development; fulfill state regulatory training requirements; apply for scholarships to pursue credentials, certificates, and degrees in early childhood education; and to establish career and professional development goals.

^z Educator wage data from the Early Childhood Workforce Registry reflect wages from a sample of early educators active in the registry including teachers (n=6,054), assistant teachers (n=5,535), and directors (n=1,671).

Figure 11.

Adult employment

Average annual unemployment rates in Gila & Graham County (not seasonally adjusted) (2025)¹



Labor force participation (LFP) & unemployment (UE) rates (2023)²

	LFP	UE
San Carlos Apache Region	47%	17%
Gila County	47%	7%
Graham County	51%	6%
Arizona	61%	5%

Major employers in the region³

San Carlos Apache Tribal Government

San Carlos Apache Healthcare Corporation

Apache Gold & Apache Sky Casinos

San Carlos Unified School District

Early Care & Education Workforce

Role	#	Pay	Credentials
Early Childhood Program Teachers ⁴	2	\$14-\$17/hr	Associate's degrees Child Development Associate (CDA) credential
Early Childhood Program Teaching Assistants ⁴	8	\$14-\$17/hr	
Head Start Classroom Teachers ⁵	11	Bachelor's degrees Associate's degrees CDA credentials Enrolled in ECE coursework	
Head Start Teaching Assistants ⁵	18		
Early Head Start Classroom Teachers ⁵	35		

¹ Arizona Office of Economic Opportunity. (2025). [Local Area Unemployment Statistics & Industry Employment datasets].

² San Carlos Apache Tribe. (2026). Economic Enterprises.

³ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). 2023 American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates, 2019-2023.

⁴ San Carlos Early Childhood Program. (2025). [Child care dataset & CCDF program profile].

⁵ Office of Head Start. (2025). [2022-2024 Program Information Report].

Notes: The "labor force" is all persons who are working (employed) or looking for work (unemployed). The "labor force participation rate" is the fraction of the population who are in the labor force, whether employed or unemployed. The "unemployment rate" is the fraction of the civilian labor force who are unemployed.

CHILD DEVELOPMENT & HEALTH

Maternal and infant health

Access to quality health care can promote positive health outcomes for mothers and infants.¹⁰⁹ Prenatal care is associated with reduced complications during pregnancy and birth, while also providing expectant parents with an opportunity to engage with health professionals.^{110, 111} The San Carlos Apache Region saw an overall decline in the rate of timely prenatal care (care initiated in the first trimester) between 2019 (**50.8%**) and 2023 (**43.8%**). These rates were consistently lower than those in the state (**68.9%** to **71.7%**) over the same period. The proportion of births to mothers in the region with inadequate prenatal care (1-4 prenatal care visits) showed a notable decline in 2023 (**21.2%**) after remaining above 28% between 2019 and 2022, while births to mothers with no prenatal care fluctuated from 2019 to 2023 (**7.5%** to **10.7%**). Local key informants shared that transportation issues and a lack of care coordination are barriers to prenatal care in the region. Since there is not a birthing hospital in the region, there is a perception that prenatal care is not available or important to establish locally. Additionally, prevalent substance use disorder and traumatic loss during the COVID-19 pandemic could be contributing to hesitance to seek care. The Community Health Representatives (CHR) Program, part of the San Carlos Apache Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), offers free services to expectant mothers including education about prenatal care, connection to local resources and transportation to appointments.^{aa}

Outside of access to adequate prenatal care, other risk factors like low birth weight and preterm birth can impact child health outcomes.¹¹² Low birth weight births (weighing less than 5 pounds and 8 ounces or 2,500 grams) and preterm births (those delivered before 37 weeks of pregnancy) can result in cognitive, respiratory, and gastrointestinal issues as well as increased risk of diabetes and are one of the largest drivers of infant mortality in the U.S.¹¹³ Low birth weight births in the region showed notable variability between 2019 and 2023, ranging from a recent low of **5.3%** in 2021 to a recent high of **12.5%** in 2022, compared to a range of **7.4%** to **8.1%** statewide during the same time. Between 2019 and 2023, the San Carlos Apache Region consistently had a larger proportion of preterm births (**10.3%** to **16.7%**) than Arizona (**9.3%** to **10%**) and did not meet the Healthy people 2030^{bb} target for preterm births (no more than **9.4%** of births). There is growing

^{aa} For more information about the Community Health Representatives Program, see <https://www.scathhs.gov/index.php/programs/community-health-representatives>

^{bb} Healthy People identifies science-based targets to guide national health promotion and disease prevention efforts. For more information see https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/healthy_people/index.htm

evidence that disparities in birth outcomes can be linked to social, structural, and environmental inequities in Indigenous communities, with disparities growing after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic specifically.^{114, 115}

Teenage parents often experience increased stress and hardship in comparison to older parents and other non-parent teenagers. They are less likely to complete high school or college and more likely to maintain a lower socioeconomic status and require public assistance to make ends meet.^{116, 117, 118, 119, 120} In the San Carlos Apache Region, births to teenaged mothers (age 19 and younger) decreased from 2020-2021 (**13.6%**) to 2022-2023 (**8.6%**),^{cc} though they were higher than statewide during the same time period (**4.9%** to **4.5%**). This is consistent with a recent Health Profile of American Indian and Alaska Native population, which shows that births to teenaged mothers are more common among American Indian/Alaska Native populations in Arizona than in the overall population.¹²¹

Access to care and service navigation

Tribally managed health systems can improve the quality and relevance of available services and help address health disparities caused by federal policies that have disrupted traditional ways of life for Native communities.¹²² Since 2015, the San Carlos Apache Tribe has operated the Ilee Baa' Gowah San Carlos Apache Healthcare Corporation in Peridot under a 638 contract. The hospital is a level IV trauma center, and healthcare services offered include internal medicine, obstetrics and gynecology, pediatrics, surgery, emergency medicine, radiology, podiatry, specialty health services, nutrition and dietetics, physical therapy and dental care.^{dd} This campus co-locates with services offered through the San Carlos Apache Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), which focuses more on preventive care including public health nursing and behavioral health services. Ilee Baa' Gowah also operates the Clarence Wesley Health Center (CWHC) in Bylas, which recently opened a new facility with upgraded outpatient services for women's health, pediatrics, podiatry and wound care, diabetes, nutrition and dietetics, dental care, optometry, physical therapy, imaging, laboratory and pharmacy.¹²³ Additionally, a long-term care and skilled nursing facility is being constructed in Peridot.¹²⁴ In fiscal year 2024, **1,088** children birth to age 5 in the San Carlos Apache Region were served at Ilee Baa' Gowah San Carlos Apache Healthcare Corporation. Based on the 2020 Census estimate of young children in the region (n = **1,192**), this suggests they served nearly all young children in the region. That same year, Ilee Baa' Gowah San Carlos Apache Healthcare Corporation provided **1,937** well-care visits for children and adolescents in the region.

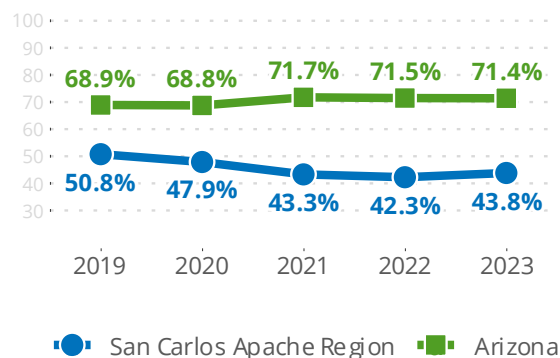
^{cc} Please note that the total number of births in the region each year is small (between 16 and 28 from 2018-2023), so percentages may appear to vary more from year to year.

^{dd} For more information about Ilee Baa' Gowah San Carlos Apache Healthcare, see <https://www.scahealth.org/about/>

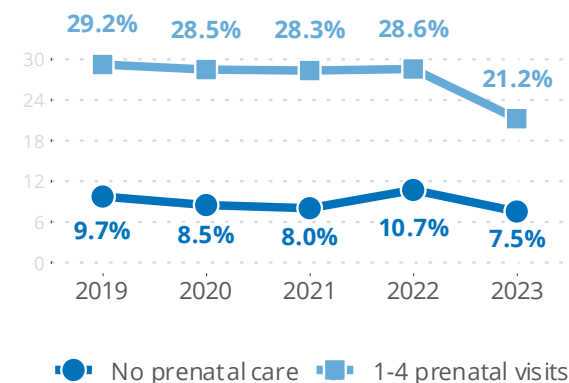
Figure 12.

Maternal and infant health

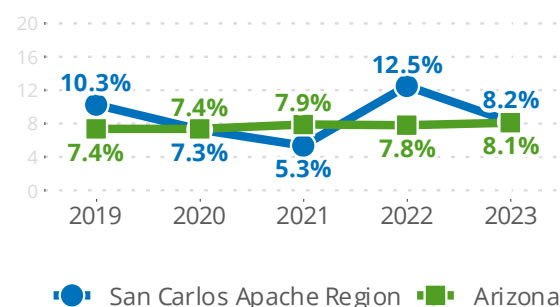
Births to mothers who began prenatal care in the first trimester¹



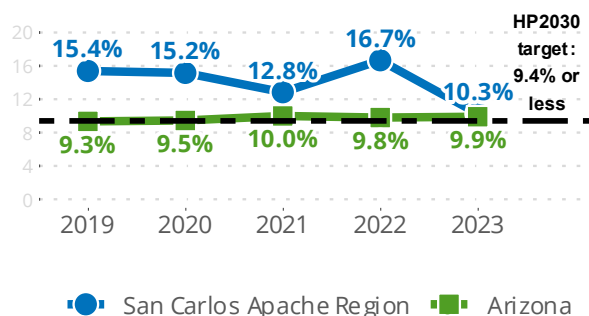
Births to mothers with inadequate prenatal care¹



Low birth weight births (less than 2,500 grams)¹



Preterm births (less than 37 weeks gestation)^{1,2}



Births to teenaged mothers (ages 19 and younger)¹

	2020-2021	2022-2023	
San Carlos Apache Region	13.6%	8.6%	▼
Arizona	4.9%	4.5%	▼

¹ Arizona Department of Health Services. (2025). [Vital Statistic dataset].

² Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2025). [Healthy People 2030 Objectives: MICH-02, MICH-07].

Health insurance coverage is an important indicator of whether families can access, afford and utilize medical care. This includes access to well-child visits and developmental screenings at a lower cost. Members of federally-recognized Tribes can access health care services provided through the Indian Health Service (IHS) and/or Tribally administered health care facilities. However, IHS and Tribal health systems have been consistently underfunded in relation to the per capita need—higher rates of Medicaid enrollment can help supplement funding through services reimbursement and provide members with more care options.¹²⁵ Arizona’s Medicaid program, the Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System (AHCCCS) is a major source of health insurance in the San Carlos Apache Region. In 2023, nearly a quarter of births (**24%**) paid for by AHCCCS.¹²⁶ AHCCCS enrollment data for young children birth to age 5 suggest that nearly all young children were enrolled in AHCCCS in 2020 (n= **1,122**, compared to a 2020 Census estimate of 1,192 young children in the region). However, AHCCCS enrollment has been declining in recent years, with a sharp drop to **786** children in 2023 followed by a small increase to **802** children in 2024.

Well-child visits provide scheduled opportunities for pediatricians to monitor growth and development, administer immunizations, observe familial dynamics and provide guidance to caregivers on essential topics and emerging milestones.^{127, 128, 129} The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that providers ask parents about developmental concerns at all infant and well-child visits and have parents complete a standardized developmental screen at the 9-, 18- and 30-month appointments.¹³⁰ Ensuring that children have access to timely and adequate screening and intervention services from birth to age 5 can be key for preparing children for kindergarten. In 2024, only about a third of young children (**13%**, n = **106**) with AHCCCS insurance coverage had a claim for a comprehensive well-child visit in 2024. However, **337** children had at least one appointment with a primary care provider (PCP) billed to AHCCCS. The number of children with PCP visits has declined slightly in the region from a high of **414** in 2022, mirroring recent declines in the overall number of children with AHCCCS insurance coverage.

Well-child visits are especially important because developmental challenges are more frequently undiagnosed and untreated among American Indian and Alaska Native children, partly due to the lack of screening tools that incorporate cultural, economic and geographic context.¹³¹ In the San Carlos Apache Region, **149** children in the region received developmental screenings through Head Start and **54** through Early Head Start in program year 2024. The First Things First San Carlos Apache Regional Partnership Council also funds a developmental and sensory screening strategy, which reached **47** children in state fiscal year 2025, but **fewer than 10** of these children received a developmental screening.

Oral health is a fundamental component of overall health, well-being and self-confidence. Children with dental pain and lower oral health-related quality of life have more school absences and worse academic performance.^{132, 133, 134} Preventative dental care services, such as the application of

topical fluoride and dental sealants, are recommended for children to prevent tooth decay.^{135,136} Required for federal agencies, the IHS sets target performance indicators related to oral health. The targets support the Healthy People 2030 oral health conditions targets.¹³⁷ In the San Carlos Apache Region, the proportion of children ages 1-5 served by IHS who were provided services for topical fluorides increased from fiscal year (FY) 2023 (**40.2%**) to FY 2024 (**54%**), and both years met and far-exceeded the IHS target of **21.1%**. The proportion of children ages 2-5 who received dental sealants also met the IHS target of **9.9%** in both 2023 (**11.7%**) and 2024 (**14.1%**).

Immunization and child mortality

Immunization serves as the best method to prevent communicable childhood diseases in children and their communities. When enough children are immunized, the protection even extends to those who are unable or who choose not to be vaccinated.¹³⁸ In the San Carlos Apache Region, the proportion of children ages 19-35 months seen at IHS with all recommended immunizations increased from fiscal year (FY) 2023 (**42.9%**) to FY 2024 (**50.8%**). This trend was similar to immunizations seen by IHS facilities operating throughout the Phoenix Area from FY 2023 (**43.3%**) to FY 2024 (**47.2%**). Notably, **all children** ages 3-4 who were enrolled in San Carlos Apache Head Start were reported to be fully up-to-date on all required immunizations in FY 2024, compared to **73%** of children enrolled in Early Head Start.

The region's measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine coverage for kindergarteners in state fiscal year (SFY) 2024, **92.5%**, while high, was below the threshold for herd immunity of **95%**, and neither the region nor the state met the Healthy People 2030 target of **95%** or higher.¹³⁹ This is especially concerning as Arizona has been experiencing an active measles outbreak since August 2025.^{ee, 140}

Healthy People 2030 set a target of no more than **5.0** infant deaths per 1,000 live births, which Graham County (**4.9**) met between 2021 and 2023 but Gila County (**10.4**) far exceeded. San Carlos Apache Region data were suppressed due to very small numbers of infant deaths (**fewer than 6** between 2021 and 2023). In contrast, young child mortality was higher in Graham County (**45.2** deaths per 100,000 children ages 1-4) compared to the state (**29.8**) between 2021 and 2023, while Gila County had **no young child deaths** during this time. It is important to note that Graham County has a relatively small population of young children (**2,276** children ages 1-4 according to the 2020 Census), so these larger mortality rates relate to a very small number of child deaths. However, these higher rates still indicate that young children face a higher risk of death in Graham County than elsewhere in the state.

^{ee} Gila County had **0** cases as of June 4, 2026. For more up-to-date case counts see <https://www.azdhs.gov/preparedness/epidemiology-disease-control/measles/index.php>

Figure 13.

Access to care and service navigation

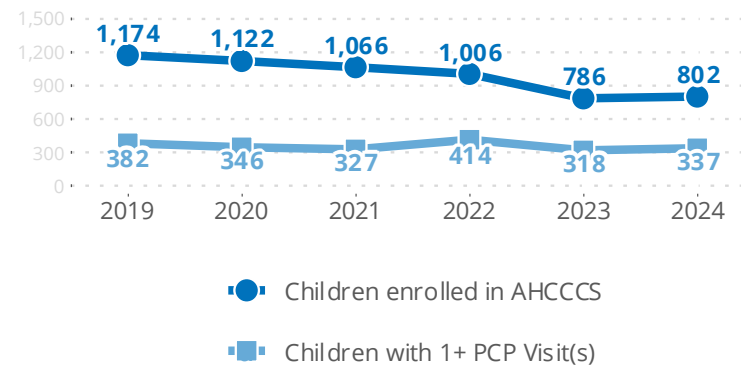
1,088

children birth to age 5 in the San Carlos Apache Region were served at San Carlos Apache Healthcare (2024)¹

1,937

well-care visits for children and adolescents at San Carlos Apache Healthcare (2024)¹

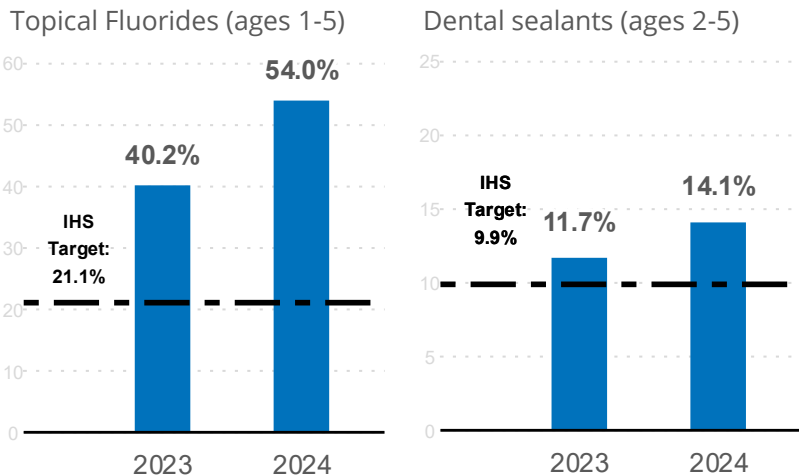
AHCCCS-enrolled children birth to 5 and children with primary care provider visits billed to AHCCCS²



13%

of children birth to age 5 enrolled in AHCCCS in the region had at least one well-child visit (2024)²

Oral health services provided at IHS facilities (2023 & 2024)^{1,3}



Developmental screenings for children birth to age 5 completed by programs in the San Carlos Apache Region

Head Start (2024) ⁴	149
Early Head Start (2024) ⁴	54
FTF-funded strategies (2025) ⁵	<10

¹ San Carlos Apache Healthcare Corporation. (2025). [Maternal and Child Health dataset]. ² ASU CHiR. (2025). [AHCCCS claims dataset]. ³ Indian Health Service. (2025). [Maternal and Child Health dataset].

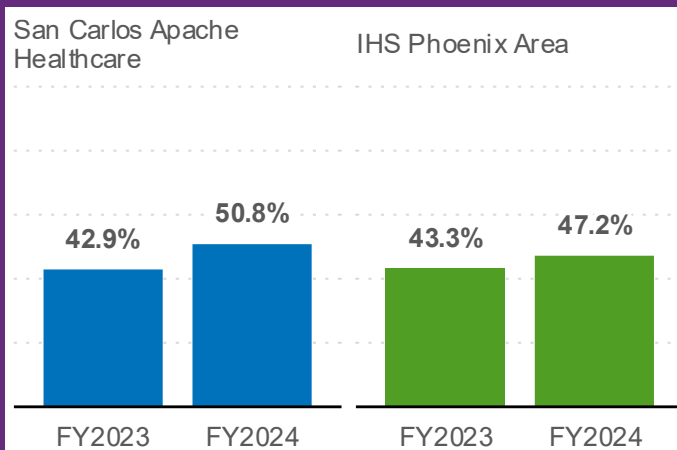
⁴ Office of Head Start. (2025). [2022-2024 Program Information Report]. ⁵ First Things First. (2025). [Home Visitation & Screenings Reach datasets].

Note: AHCCCS data reflect children birth to age 5 with approved insurance claims– these data may not reflect all care provided in the region. In 2024, <10 children enrolled in AHCCCS in the region had a claim for a developmental screening. Developmental screenings were provided through the Developmental & Sensory Screening Strategy; 47 children overall received developmental, hearing or vision screenings in the region.

Figure 14.

Immunization and child mortality

Children ages 19-35 months seen at San Carlos Apache Healthcare or IHS with all recommended immunizations^{1,2}



Children with up-to-date immunizations in San Carlos Apache Head Start programs³

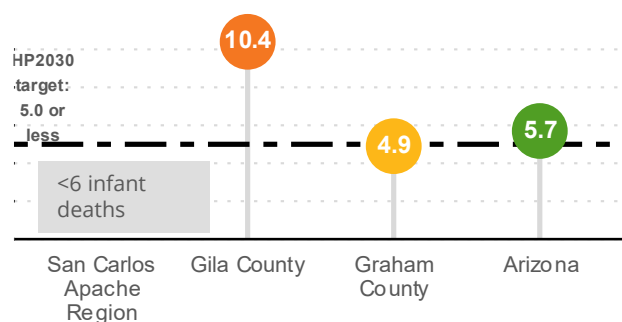
	2024
Early Head Start	73%
Head Start	100%

92.5%

of kindergarteners in the San Carlos Apache Region had complete MMR immunizations (2024)⁴



Infant mortality rate per 1,000 live births (2021-2023 combined)^{4,5}



¹ San Carlos Apache Healthcare Corporation. (2025). [Maternal and Child Health dataset].

² Indian Health Service. (2025). [Maternal and Child Health dataset].

³ Office of Head Start. (2025). [2022-2024 Program Information Report].

⁴ Arizona Department of Health Services. (2025). [Vital Statistics & Immunization dataset].

⁵ Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2025). [Healthy People 2030 Objectives: MICH-02, MICH-07].

Young children with special needs

Timely connection with early intervention services— such as speech, physical, occupational and behavioral therapy— can shape school readiness and the developmental path of young children with medical conditions, developmental delays and even certain risk factors for delays.¹⁴¹ In Arizona, the Department of Economic Security's (DES) Arizona Early Intervention Program (AzEIP), the Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD) and the Arizona Department of Education's (ADE) Early Childhood Special Education Program each play a role in providing services to families with children who have special needs. AzEIP^{ff} provides early intervention and a variety of supportive services to families of children birth to age 2 with developmental delays or disabilities.¹⁴²

In state fiscal year (SFY) 2023 and 2024 combined, children birth to age 2 in the San Carlos Apache Region were referred to AzEIP most frequently by physicians (**36%**) and parents or family (**27%**), with smaller proportions referred by a health or service agency (**14%**), a hospital or health facility (**9%**) or the Department of Child Safety (**9%**). Just over one-third (**37%**) of referred children were found eligible or received services, while the remaining two-thirds of those referred either could not be reached (**27%**), their families were not interested in services when offered (**18%**), children were screened out (**5%**) or assessed not eligible for services (**14%**). Local community experts indicated that challenges with reaching families are common for the school district and other services in the region too, sometimes due to phone numbers changing when pre-paid plans run out. There are also many no-shows for developmental screenings offered four times a year at the school, with stigma being common in the community as well as a lack of trust in AzEIP since it is seen as an outside entity. Caregivers may also change their minds when they learn about what is involved in pursuing services for their child (e.g., transportation, the number of appointments). Recent research on developmental screenings systems in Native communities emphasizes the importance of ensuring parents understand the goals and screening process, building trust between parents and screening providers and ensuring clear communication and cultural competency throughout the screening and referral process.¹⁴³

Overall, in SFY 2024, **1.5%** of young children birth to age 2 in the San Carlos Apache Region were estimated to have received early intervention services from AzEIP. This is lower than that seen across the state (**2.5%**) and country (**4.3%**)¹⁴⁴, and national research suggests that many more young children would benefit from early intervention than are receiving it.^{145, 146} Children who receive a diagnosis of autism, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, cognitive or intellectual disability or down

^{ff} For more information on AzEIP (which is a division of the Department of Economic Security), visit <https://www.azdes.gov/azeip/>

syndrome may also become eligible for services through DDD.^{gg} In SFY 2023 and 2024 combined, **fewer than 10** children birth to age 5 were served by AzEIP and/or DDD in the region, again indicating that very few young children receive early intervention or developmental disability services in the region.

Preschool to 3rd grade students with special needs

As a child with special needs approaches age 3, they can be transferred from AzEIP to the Early Childhood Special Education Program to receive services through their local education agency (LEA).^{hh} In the 2021-22 school year, **fewer than 11**ⁱⁱ children ages 3 to 5 with special needs were enrolled in elementary schools in the San Carlos Apache region. For kindergarten through 3rd grade students in the region, enrollment in special education in public and charters schools remained relatively stable between the 2017-18 (n = **104**) and 2019-20 (n = **100**) school years, but declined notably, almost by half, by the 2021-22 school year (n = **57**).

Of the preschoolers (ages 3-5) with disabilities in the region in the 2021-22 school year, half (**50%**) were diagnosed with a developmental delay (DD), and the other half (**50%**) with preschool severe delay (PSD). Across the state in the 2021-22 school year, developmental delay was also the most common disability type among preschoolers ages 3-5 receiving special education services (**43%**).¹⁴⁷ Among kindergarten through 3rd grade students receiving special education services in the region in 2021-22, a larger proportion was diagnosed with a developmental delay (**65%**) than younger children in the region. A smaller proportion of kindergarten through 3rd grade students receiving services in the region were diagnosed with a speech/language impairment (SLI) (**19%**), specific learning disability (**7%**), autism (**7%**) or other disabilities^{jj} (**2%**). School district staff corroborated that they are seeing more children with autism with more severe needs as well as speech and language impairments in recent years and expect those numbers to increase.

Head Start is a comprehensive early childhood education program for children whose families meet Department of Health and Human Services income eligibility guidelines. The program offers

^{gg} For more information on DDD (which is a division of the Department of Economic Security), visit <https://des.az.gov/services/disabilities/developmental-disabilities>

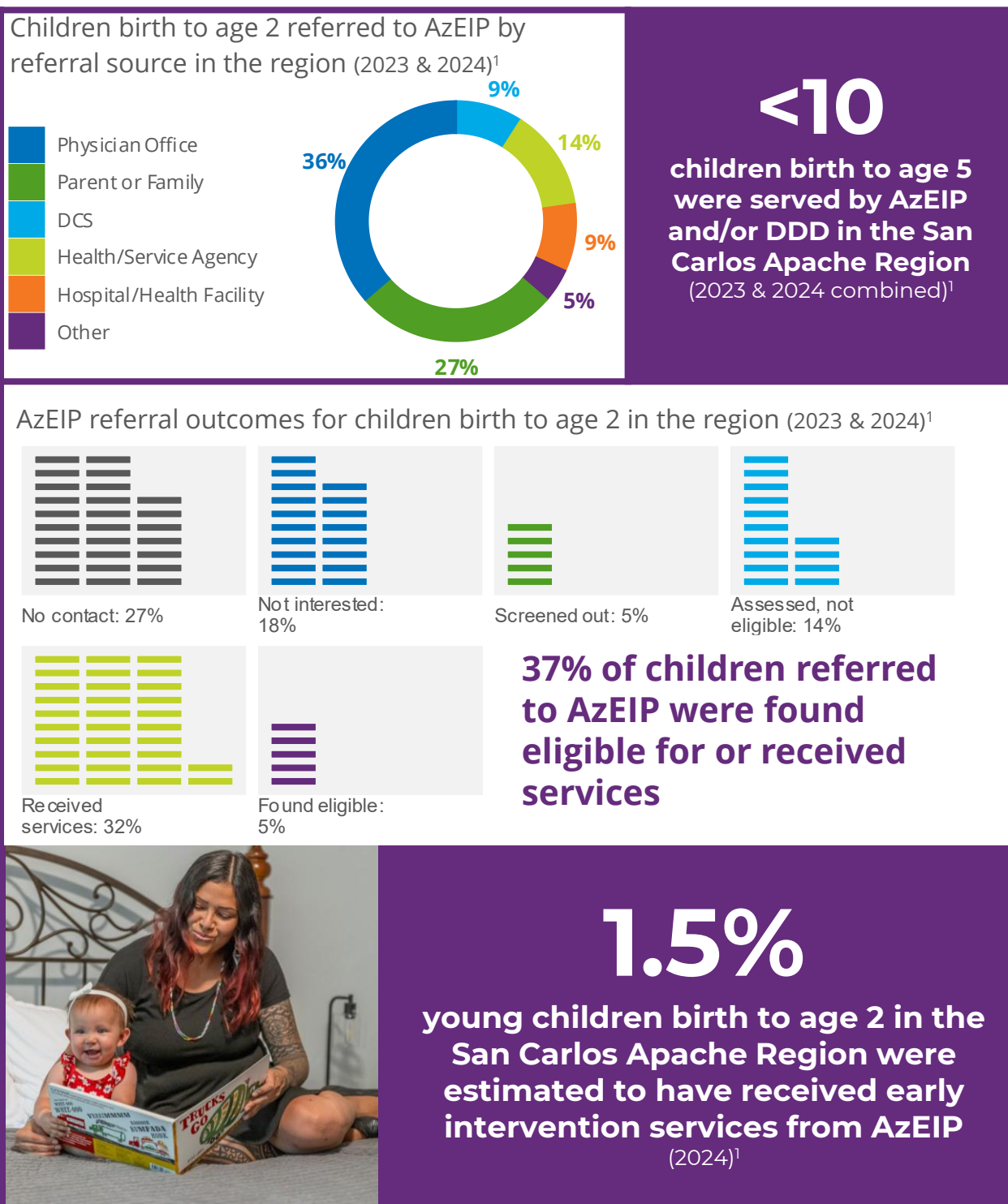
^{hh} For more information on ADE's Early Childhood Special Education program, visit <https://www.azed.gov/specialeducation/early-childhood-special-education> and <https://www.azed.gov/specialeducation/early-childhood-special-education-child-find>

ⁱⁱ Fewer than 11 (<11) is used when the count of students is too small to be reported according to ADE student privacy guidelines.

^{jj} The most common disabilities in the "Other" category are other health impairments (these are usually chronic health conditions that affect a child's ability to attend or participate in school), intellectual disabilities, emotional disturbance, hearing or vision impairment, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairments and deaf-blindness.

Figure 15.

Young children with special needs



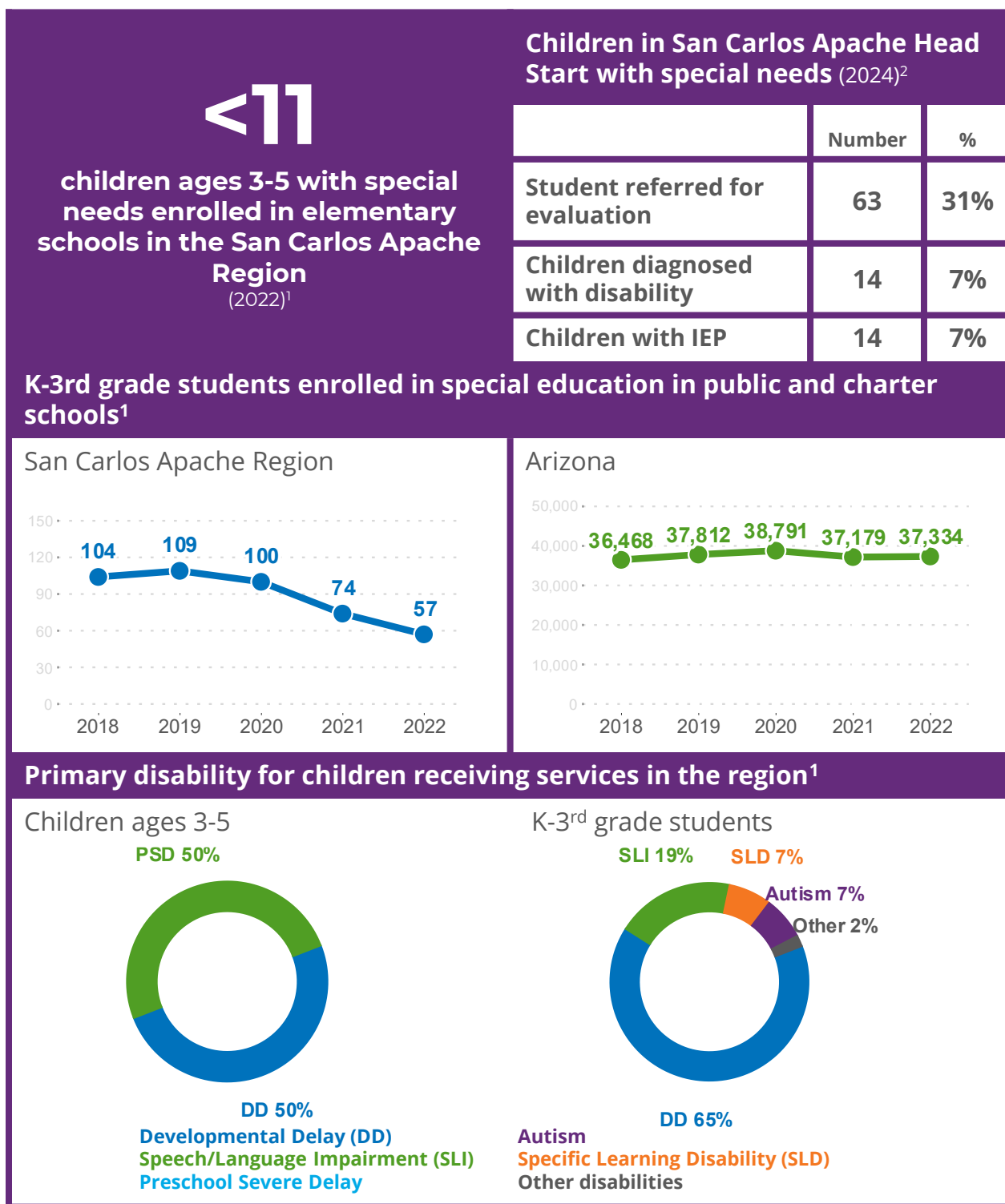
¹ Arizona Department of Economic Security. (2024). [Arizona Early Intervention Program & Division of Developmental Disabilities datasets].

Note: Data are presented for 2023 and 2024 combined due to the small numbers of referrals each year.

a broad range of individualized services in the areas of education and child development, special education, health services, nutrition and parent/family development. When new preschool age students enroll in the San Carlos Apache Head Start program, they receive a developmental screening using the Ages and Stages Questionnaire or the Developmental Indicators for the Assessment of Learning screening tool, both widely-used and validated screening tools for young children.¹⁴⁸ Students identified through this process can be further assessed and enrolled in an individualized education program (IEP) to provide specialized developmental and education supports to help them thrive. In federal fiscal year (FFY) 2024, almost one-third (**31%**) of children ages 3-5 in San Carlos Apache Head Start were referred for evaluation for special needs. A total of **14** children had a diagnosed disability with an IEP, representing **7%** of students enrolled in the program. These numbers suggest that there may be more children in the region who would benefit from early intervention services but are not receiving services for disabilities until they enroll in Head Start.

Figure 16.

Preschool to 3rd grade students with special needs



¹ Arizona Department of Education. (2023). [Exceptional Student Services dataset].

² Office of Head Start. (2025). [2022-2024 Program Information Report].

Note: Most common disabilities in the "Other" category are other health impairments (these are usually chronic health conditions that affect a child's ability to attend or participate in school), intellectual disabilities, emotional disturbance, hearing or vision impairment, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairments, and deaf-blindness. Head Start data reflect federal fiscal years; school data reflect state fiscal years.

MAPS & METHODS

Methods

U.S. Census and American Community Survey Data. The U.S. Census^{kk} is an enumeration of the population of the United States conducted every ten years, and includes information about housing, race, and ethnicity. The 2020 U.S. Census data are available by census block. There are about 108,000 inhabited blocks in Arizona, each with an average population of 66 people. The 2020 U.S. Census data for the region presented in this report were drawn from the Census Geography for the San Carlos Reservation.

The American Community Survey (ACS)^{ll} is a survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau each month by mail, telephone and face-to-face interviews. It covers many different topics, including income, language, education, employment and housing. ACS data are available by census tract. Arizona is divided into approximately 1,750 census tracts, each with an average population of 3,900 people. ACS data for the region were drawn from the Census Geography for the San Carlos Reservation. The most recent and most reliable ACS data are averaged over the past five years; those are the data included in this report. They are based on surveys conducted from 2019 to 2023. In general, the reliability of ACS estimates is greater for more populated areas. Statewide estimates, for example, are more reliable than county-level estimates.

First Things First (FTF) strategy data. Data related to FTF-funded strategies were provided for this report by FTF staff. These data included regional estimates of oral health indicators and hearing, vision, socio-emotional and developmental screening reach, zip code-level service data for home visitation programs, statewide workforce registry wage data and provider-level Quality First participation and enrollment data. The vendor used an apportioning file provided by FTF to create regional estimates of home visitation services from the zip-code level file.

Early education and service data from the Arizona Department of Economic Security (DES). Data related to child care assistance, Arizona Early Intervention Program (AzEIP) referrals, outcomes and services, and Division of Developmental Disabilities services were provided by DES. These data were geocoded to regions and sub-regions by staff at DES using a custom shapefile provided by the vendor.

Health data from the Arizona Department of Health Services (ADHS). Data related to births, infant and maternal health, immunization rates at child care and school facilities, infant and child mortality and enrollment and participation in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for

^{kk} For more information, see <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census.html>

^{ll} For more information, see <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs.html>

Women, Infants and Children (WIC) were provided by ADHS. All data apart from immunization data were geocoded to regions and sub-regions by staff at ADHS using a custom shapefile provided by the vendor. The vendor geocoded child care and school facilities to regions using addresses or coordinates provided in the immunization datasets to create custom immunization coverage estimates.

Health data from the Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System (AHCCCS). FTF partnered with the Arizona State University Center for Health Information and Research (CHiR) to create custom tabulations of health claims data for young children birth to age 5 enrolled in AHCCCS health care plans. These estimates, at the state, county, regional and sub-regional levels, were provided to the vendor for inclusion in this report.

Health data from the Indian Health Service (IHS). Data related to active users of IHS services and performance on select Government Performance and Results Act indicators related to child health were provided by the Indian Health Service Phoenix Area Office. Data for each region reflect the population seeking services in specific service units, clinics and service areas; these data do not reflect affiliation or membership with a particular Tribe (e.g., any individual identified as American Indian or Alaska Native descent and belonging to the community served by IHS seen within the last three years at a specific health facility or a facility within a specific service area or service unit was counted as an active user).

Service data from the Inter Tribal Council of Arizona. Data related to enrollment and participation in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) were provided by the Inter Tribal Council of Arizona for each local WIC program. These data were sent to local WIC program directors, who then shared the data with the vendor.

Employment and industry data from the Arizona Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). Data for unemployment rates^{mm} were obtained from the OEO for counties and multi-county areas (which combine 2-4 small counties to produce a more reliable estimate).

Education data from the Arizona Department of Education (ADE). For past FTF Regional Needs and Assets reports, regional estimates for education data were obtained through a custom tabulation of unredacted data files provided by ADE. Access to unredacted data files was not available for this report. Instead, publicly-available data files published by ADEⁿⁿ were used to examine trends in enrollment, assessment results, graduation and dropout rates, and data on chronic absenteeism were obtained via the Maricopa Association of Governments and ReadOn Arizona MAPLit data tool.^{oo} Due to the frequency of data suppression in these files to protect

^{mm} For more information, see <https://o eo.az.gov/labor-market/unemployment>

ⁿⁿ For more information, see <https://www.azed.gov/accountability-research/data>

^{oo} For more information, see <https://geo.azmag.gov/maps/readonaz/>

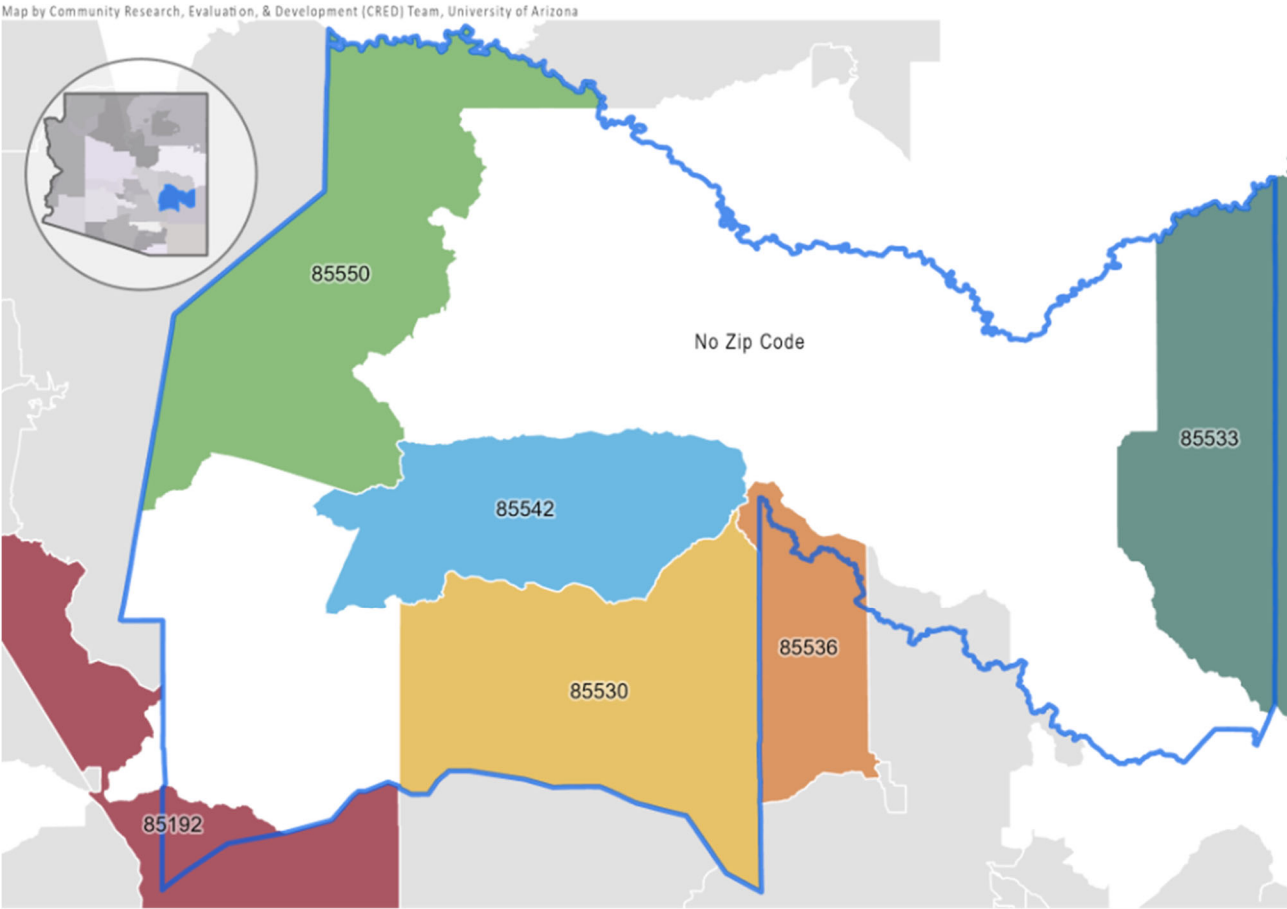
student privacy, data could not be reliably aggregated across schools or districts to create regional estimates. Data on services for students with disabilities by grade are not publicly available for geographies smaller than the state, so custom regional estimates from the 2024 Regional Needs and Assets reports were used in this report.

Change calculations. Unless otherwise specified, changes in counts of data over time (i.e., percent increase or decrease) are calculated by subtracting the earlier number (e.g., a 2010 count) from the later number (e.g. the 2020 count) and dividing the result by the earlier number (e.g. the 2010 count). This calculation provides the percent change between the most recent count and the prior count, relative to the prior count.

Data availability. State agency data in this report were provided to FTF by agency staff through a data request process initiated in February 2025 and extending to March 2026. Wherever possible, data were requested for multiple years to allow for the visualization of trends as well as for the most recent year available. However, due to both the constraints of agency staff and agency-maintained datasets as well as the timing of requests, not all data were available on the same time and geographic scales. This report attempts to include the most recent and complete data available, with notes indicating where data were not available for particular time periods or geographies.

Data suppression. To protect the confidentiality of program participants, the FTF Data Dissemination and Suppression Guidelines preclude reporting of social service and early education programming data if the count is less than 10 and data related to health or developmental delay if the count is less than 6. In addition, some data received from state agencies are suppressed according to their own guidelines. ADHS does not report counts between 1 and 5; DES does not report counts between 1 and 9; ADE does not report counts less than 11. Additionally, ADE requires suppression of the second-smallest value or the denominator in tables where a reader might be able to use the numbers provided to calculate a suppressed value. Throughout this report, information which is not available because of suppression guidelines is indicated by entries of "<6" or "<10" or "<11" for counts, or "DS" (data suppressed) for percentages. Data are sometimes not available for particular regions, either because a program did not operate in the region or because data are only available at the county level. Cases where data are not available will be indicated by an entry of "N/A", "NA" or a note that states "data not available."

Map of Zip Codes in the Region



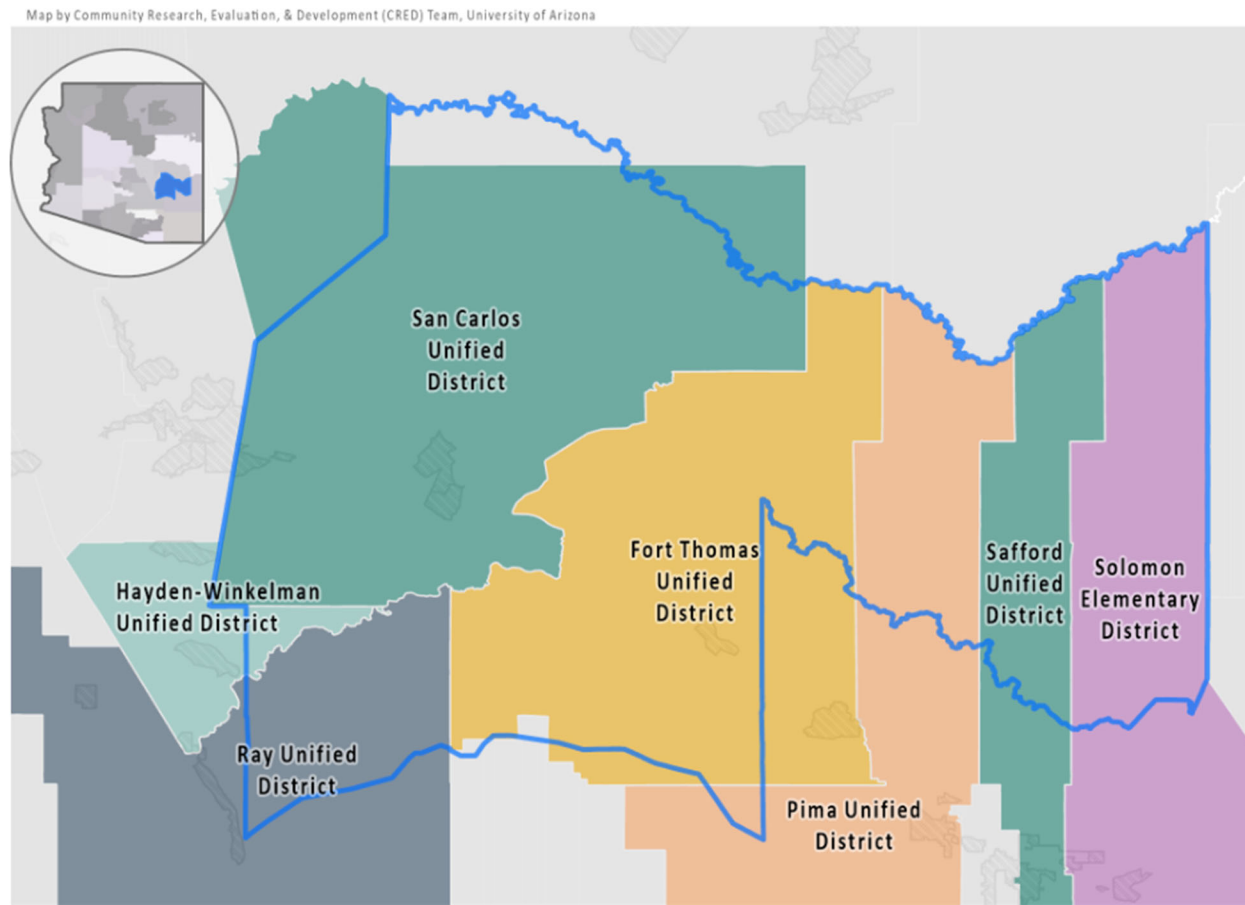
Source: Custom map by the Community Research, Evaluation, & Development (CRED) Team using shapefiles obtained from First Things First and the U.S. Census Bureau TIGER/Line Shapefiles (<https://www.census.gov/cgi-bin/geo/shapefiles/index.php>)

Zip Code Tabulation Areas (ZCTAs) in the San Carlos Apache Region

Zip Code Tabulation Area (ZCTA)	Population (all ages)	Percent of this ZCTA's total population living in the San Carlos Apache Region	This ZCTA is shared with
San Carlos Apache Region	10,251		
85530	2,104	100.0%	
85533	2	0.1%	Graham/Greenlee Region
85542	3,172	100%	
85550	4,934	100.0%	

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2023). 2020 Decennial Census, Demographic and Housing Characteristics, Table P1.

Map of School Districts in the Region



Source: Custom map by the Community Research, Evaluation, & Development (CRED) Team using shapefiles obtained from First Things First and the U.S. Census Bureau TIGER/Line Shapefiles (<https://www.census.gov/cgi-bin/geo/shapefiles/index.php>)

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