

This profile is part of MDC's report, *State of the South: Building an Infrastructure of Opportunity for the Next Generation*. For a list of sources, and to see the full report, which includes an overview and profiles of nine Southern communities, visit [stateofthesouth.org](http://stateofthesouth.org).



## PORT ST. JOE / FLORIDA

Richard Hart

*While an informal network is working to rebuild the economy and give young people the tools to thrive amid harsh economic and social realities, they haven't formally linked key components—the school system, community college, workforce development, and economic development—that would create an infrastructure of opportunity.*



**THE PLACE:** a tight-knit beach community seeking to restore an economy undone by the departure of a major paper mill, its economic driver

**THE CHALLENGE:** building a workforce and a job market in parallel that can be sustained over time

### ELEMENTS OF OPPORTUNITY

**INFRASTRUCTURE:** municipal, community-based, and philanthropic organizations working to address education, training, and community health challenges

**A**sk just about anyone in this Florida panhandle town about its future, and they'll tell you that the sky (a beautiful blue over sugar-sand beaches) is the limit.

"The potential for this community, the people black and white, is phenomenal," says the Rev. David Woods, Jr. of the Port St. Joe Church of God in Christ.

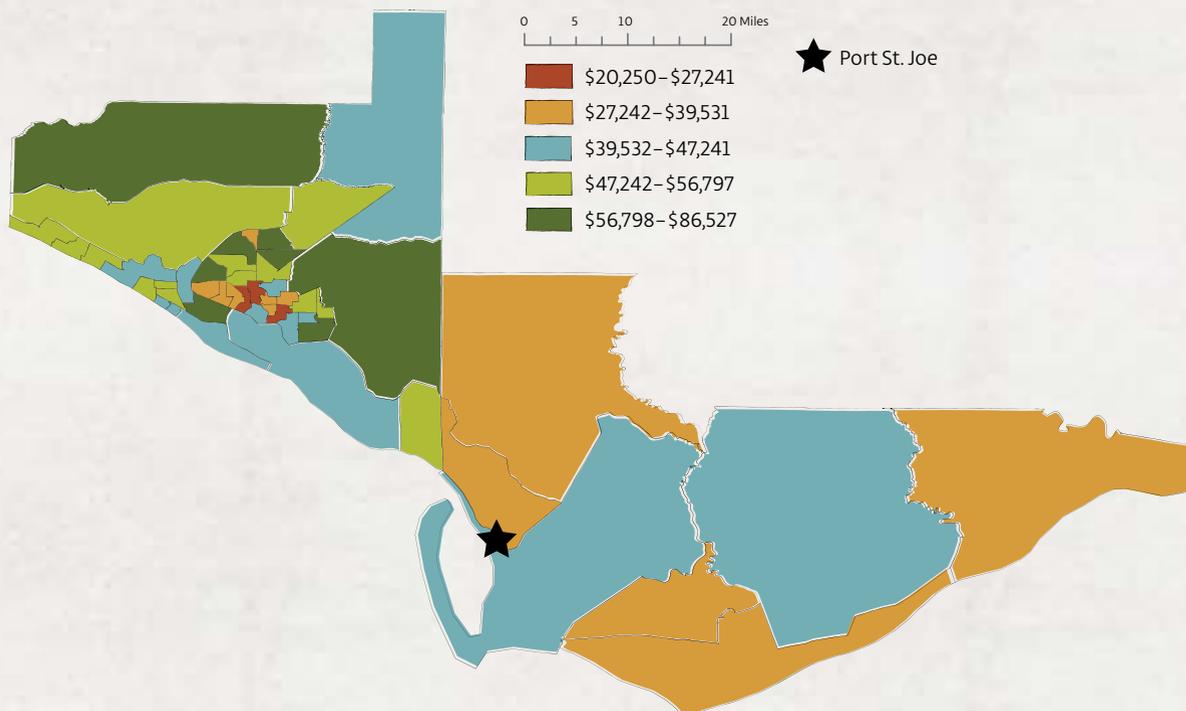
But ask them about the future for its young people, and they're not so sure.

"For years, people looked at getting good jobs at the mill," says Kimberly Bodine, executive director of CareerSource Gulf Coast. "I don't know what they dream for now, because there aren't any jobs here. If they can dream big enough, if they're thinking that way, they're thinking of getting out."

It's not because town leaders aren't trying. Many are working toward a shared economic vision. The town is a small, manageable size. It has social service agencies and nonprofits taking creative approaches, and it receives support from a foundation dedicated to eliminating deep-seated social and economic gaps.

"And there are so many dedicated people from all walks of life

## Port St. Joe / Bay, Franklin and Gulf Counties Median Household Income



who really are trying to connect it all and keep moving forward so we are still a wonderful place five, 10, 15 years from now,” says Dr. Loretta Costin, director of the Gulf/Franklin (counties) campus of Gulf Coast State College.

“But,” she says, “we need to make sure that’s true for everyone.”

And there’s the challenge. As in many rural communities, around a third of young, working-age people (18- to 35-years-old) in Port St. Joe’s Gulf County didn’t finish high school, around a third have only a high school diploma, and of the rest who attended some kind of postsecondary education, only 3 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds went on to get either an associate’s or bachelor’s degree, and only about 15 percent of those 25- to 34-years-old did.

While an informal network is working to rebuild the economy and give young people the tools to thrive amid harsh economic and social realities, they haven’t formally linked key components—the school system, community college, workforce development, and economic development—that would create an infrastructure of opportunity.

There also is a sense in some parts of the community that a handful of people pull the strings and efforts at collaboration and civic engagement are incomplete. Informal networking—along with an established power structure led by long-time families—leaves out people who would be included in a more formal network designed to be inclusive. That feeds mistrust.

The feeling is particularly strong in the African-American

community, which suffered decades of injustice under Jim Crow. North Port St. Joe, a predominantly African-American neighborhood, was recently added to the area covered by urban redevelopment only after residents complained and organized themselves. When the city began connecting to a \$21 million water plant, white neighborhoods were hooked up first, though city leaders say it was because of the way grant funding came in. And organizers of city-wide youth programs in North Port St. Joe say it is difficult to get white families to participate.

“**T**he biggest obstacle is culture,” says the Rev. Woods, a relative newcomer to town after becoming pastor of a Port St. Joe church in addition to his Panama City congregation. “All of us just need to sit down in one room and figure out what do you want Port St. Joe to look like over the next five, 10, 20 years... I think those conversations are happening at the city meetings, at the county meetings, but as far as representation of all the players who impact the culture, it’s just not happening.”

City leaders say they’re trying to be inclusive, and because of the town’s small size—the high school has just around 500 students in grades 7–12—attention can be paid to all of the town’s young people.

“Everybody knows all the kids in town—and their parents and grandparents, probably,” says Jim Anderson, the city manager. “Both sides work together when there is a need or emergency.”

## HISTORY AND CONTEXT

For decades, the path to the middle class in Port St. Joe was a job at the St. Joe Paper Company mill and associated industries. It was a company town—the mill opened in 1938 after “Joe” acquired tens of thousands of acres of timber in the area, bought a nearby railroad, and extended its lines into Port St. Joe. The mill provided thousands of union jobs over the decades—for whites and African Americans—but with a declining market, the company sold the plant in 1996 and its new owners closed it in 1998.

By then, the St. Joe Company had moved into land development. With the port’s foul smelling industries gone (it was called “the smell of money” by locals) and beach development now an option, hopes were raised in 2008 when the company announced plans for WindMark Beach, a high-end resort community. But the Great Recession quashed sales, and the St. Joe Company put the project on the market, downsized, and moved its headquarters from Jacksonville to Panama City.



In the wake of WindMark’s demise, Port St. Joe embarked on an ambitious vision. The goal is to develop its deep-water port to attract commercial shipping and shipbuilding and the higher paying jobs that go with them. The town also sees it as a potential stop for boutique cruise ships taking advantage of the area’s beautiful waterways, increasing tourism. To boost tourism and make new development more attractive, the Port St. Joe Redevelopment Agency has spent \$3.8 million to landscape the beach highway and spruce up downtown. Leaders hope that making the town more attractive will lure not only tourists, but a growing winter and weekend beach population that City Manager Jim Anderson says has increased five-fold in the last five years.

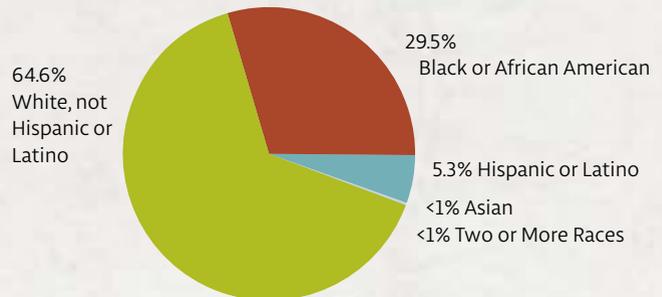
## Port St. Joe: Gulf County, FL

	Total	15-24 year olds
Population (2013)	15,829	1,695
Population (2000)	13,332	1,446

### Population Change 2000–2013

Community	18.7%	17.2%
State	22.4%	27.9%
US	12.3%	12.2%

### Race and Ethnicity of 15–24 yr olds



## THE CHALLENGE

A lot in Port St. Joe is riding on expansion of the port, a challenge given competition from Mobile, Tampa, and other, more developed Gulf ports with similar visions. But there aren’t many other options. And already there are signs that without a better prepared workforce and infrastructure of opportunity—the human capital development, employment generation, and social and financial supports necessary to help young people succeed—the industries and jobs leaders hope to attract may not come. Eastern Shipbuilding Group, based in Panama City, leased 20 acres at the port with plans to expand its shipbuilding operations. But those plans were put on hold for reasons that included an inadequately prepared workforce. The Gulf State College campus now is looking into starting a program focused on skills related to shipbuilding.

“If we cannot supply the skilled workforce, then we can’t grow and diversify this economy,” Costin says.

In the meantime, most of the jobs in Port St. Joe are in the schools, government, health care, and—like a large portion of the Florida panhandle—state prisons.

A key to building an infrastructure of opportunity is collaboration. Many in Port St. Joe recognize the link between young people’s health, education, and advanced training and the community’s ability to attract and sustain industry that creates

a middle class. Leaders pride themselves on their ability to cross boundaries and work with one another. The reason, they say, is that in a town like Port St. Joe, everyone knows everybody and all you have to do is pick up the phone.

## THE ANALYSIS AND STRATEGY

There are promising pieces of what could become an infrastructure of opportunity in Port St. Joe. Many have been aided by the support of the Jessie Ball duPont Fund.<sup>1</sup> Mrs. DuPont had personal connections and business relationships (via her family's ownership of the St. Joe Paper Co.) and included organizations in the city as beneficiaries of her estate. The fund has encouraged efforts that address fundamental social weaknesses and pumped more than \$7 million into area programs since 2003. It is nonprofits and government agencies that are most actively crossing traditional boundaries to improve conditions for young people. They include workforce development programs that reach as far down as elementary school students, a community college campus director who meets with middle-schoolers, pre-schools that also focus on parents, and a county health center that recognizes poverty as a significant factor in people's health.

**North Florida Child Development Center:** The North Florida Child Development Center focuses on early childhood programs, as its name suggests, but doesn't stop there. It reaches deep into families, providing support for young adults with children. It offers Early Head Start, Head Start, Pre-K, and school readiness programs, including medical, dental, and educational services. It works closely with parents, requiring family partnership agreements with goals that can include getting a home if they're homeless or getting a high school degree if they don't have one. The center is home to the Nemours BrightStart! Program, an early literacy intervention that focuses on teacher training, has reached into every pre-school in town, and been extended to kindergarten and first grade. The center also teaches parental literacy—steps parents can take at home that don't cost anything. "Sometimes parents just don't know the little things at home that can make a difference," says Jade Hatcher, who leads the program.

**Port St. Joe Youth Choir:** Working out of the Port St. Joe Church of Christ, the Rev. Woods has built an after-school music program that serves more than 30 young people daily. While music is the focus, it also teaches life skills, helps children address family issues, takes them on cultural field trips, and has volunteers who provide homework assistance. A key innovation was providing activities for younger siblings, making the program accessible to more teens by relieving them of after-school responsibilities at home. The Rev. Woods says outreach to include children from the white community has not been successful.

**North Port St. Joe Community Youth Initiative:** North Port St. Joe Community Youth Initiative is an after-school program for elementary school students at the former Washington High School complex, the African-American high school before integration.

With test scores starting to fall off by the fourth grade, particularly among African-American boys, "we said something has to be done to help these students, to help the potential that they have," says Minnie Likely, executive director of the youth initiative.

Likely and her volunteers provide tutoring and homework assistance, along with recreational activities. An important part of their work is to build students' confidence in their ability to succeed; they hold an honors party at the end of each nine-week grading period, celebrating every student who has made progress.

**CareerSource Gulf Coast:** It is far from the norm for workforce development boards to work at the elementary school level, but CareerSource Gulf Coast isn't a typical workforce development agency. It is the organization coming closest to addressing each step along young people's path to building lives better than those of their parents. Its leaders see a clear connection between their mission and activities for young people—even elementary school children—and are skilled at using private philanthropy to stretch federal dollars and do things that federal workforce funds don't.

"You can look at workforce through a very small frame if you choose to," says Kimberly Bodine, the executive director. "I don't see it that way. I see it as building a workforce from the very ground-level up."

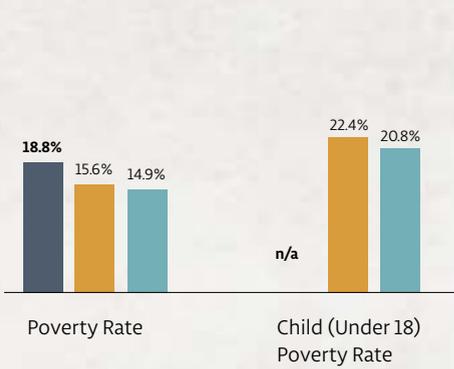
In addition to traditional services for jobseekers and employers, CareerSource operates a Summer Youth Leadership Program at the Washington High School complex to maintain learning gains from the previous school year. When they saw the disparity between black and white students on the FCAT (Florida's Comprehensive Assessment Test), they decided to create the summer program. It offers more than 120 children healthy meals, recreation, and academic enrichment, including twice-weekly field trips. These expeditions introduce young people—many of whom have never been outside of Port St. Joe—to new experiences that can spark learning and growth.

For young adults 18–21 years old, CareerSource created a 12-week "Ladder Program" that offers intensive employment services including: remediation for those who never graduated from high school, employability skills, resume building, Dale Carnegie leadership training, life coaching, personal finance lessons, and career exploration.

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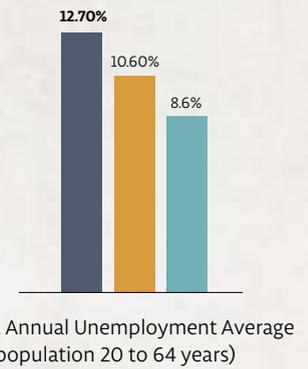
**Gulf Coast State College:** The college is working to become a key link in the network connecting young people, economic development decision makers, and employers. Still, it is a challenge to meet everyone's needs—in part because of a lack of basic skills of many young people.

Port St. Joe: Gulf County, FL

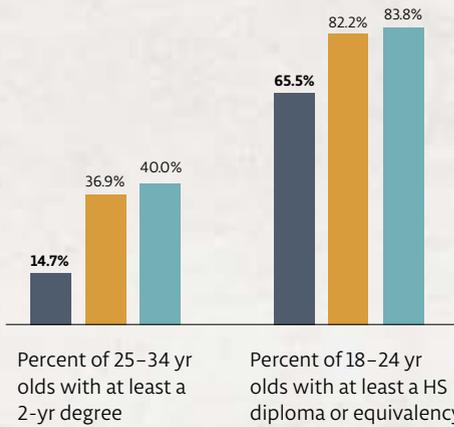


**\$39,535**  
**\$47,309**  
**\$53,046**

Median Household Income



2012 Annual Unemployment Average (for population 20 to 64 years)

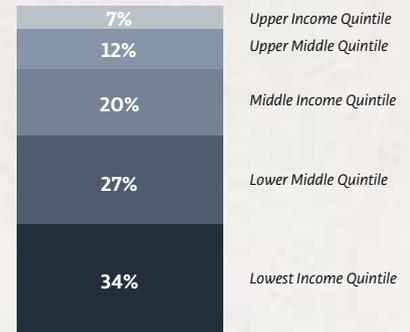


**\$37,324**  
**\$43,012**  
 n/a

MIT Living Wage annual income for one adult and child

**Economic Mobility:** Children who grew up with parents making \$16,000 (10th Percentile) end up in the...

Commuting zone: Panama City, FL Area



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey; MIT Living Wage Calculator; Equality of Opportunity Project via *New York Times*; Notes: Economic mobility data is provided for the commuting zone that includes this community; a commuting zone is a grouping of counties determined by commuting patterns and named for the largest city in that area. MIT Living Wage data estimates the minimum required living expenses for each county or state.

For instance, with a growing retirement community, a number of nursing homes, and a new and expanded Sacred Heart Hospital on the Gulf, there is a need for Certified Nursing Assistants. The college attracted more than 30 people to an information session about its expanded nursing program. Costin says. But in the end, only three people stayed through the process. Costin says the others fell out because their basic skills weren't sufficient, and some had criminal records that made them ineligible for the jobs.

Costin recognizes the college needs to reach students earlier, and starts talking to them in the eighth grade. The college has an eight-week, summer Jumpstart College Success program for recent grads that offers courses in math, leadership development, and college and career management.

**Gulf County Health Department:** The Gulf County Health Department believes health outcomes are a significant factor in many aspects of the community's life, including the strengthening of its

workforce. In 2001, recognizing there was a significant lack of basic care, Gulf County became the first health department in Florida to be designated as a Federally Qualified Health Center, significantly broadening its funding and services. Now it operates medical and dental clinics for eligible patients as well as a wide range of programs for treatment and prevention.

"What we've learned is that while our volumes are huge, the health stats are worsening—more obesity and illnesses related to tobacco use," says Marsha Lindeman, administrator of the Franklin and Gulf county health departments.

The office performs the usual health department services (WIC, birth and death certificates, etc.) but also is focused on identifying and addressing key health issues such as smoking, diabetes, and obesity rates, which are above the state averages. Florida's surgeon general has identified obesity as the state's biggest medical problem.

Sandy Martin, CEO of the health center, says addressing those

health issues is important to Port St. Joe's economic future.

"If you have diabetes, you can't work," she says. "If you can't find work, and this is the best it's going to be, then you're likelier to smoke, drink, and get into a cycle that self-perpetuates."

### QUESTIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Port St. Joe has a number of advantages working for it: a deep-water port that one day may attract cargo and small cruise ships; a developable coastline that has been hailed as the most beautiful beach in America; leaders in government, business, education, and social services with a vision for the town's economic future; and creative support systems and a community college that bring people together from across the community to address economic and workforce needs. But because Port St. Joe relies on an informal system of collaboration—one that leaders in the African-American community believe has left them out—not everyone in the city feels included in that vision for the future.

At the same time, many leaders believe economic development—developing the port, building a new highway,

rebuilding the railroad—will bring jobs for young people, and that it is the role of the schools and workforce agencies to get them ready. There isn't recognition that building an infrastructure of opportunity that connects the two, creating a skilled workforce that is attuned to the needs of existing and prospective employers, will likely make both goals more attainable.

As Kimberly Bodine at CareerSource says, "This is not a chicken or egg issue."

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