

**UNDER EMBARGO Until Monday, June 21, 2021 at 12:01 a.m. ET**

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## **Kentucky Progress on Child and Family Well-Being Jeopardized by Pandemic**

*Data Across 50 States Show Continued Challenges, But Hopes for Recovery Remain, Annie E. Casey Foundation Finds*

**LOUISVILLE, Kentucky** – Kentucky was showing measurable, though slow, progress on family economic well-being and child health coverage immediately before the COVID-19 pandemic but was falling short on curbing youth obesity and having 3- and 4-year-olds in early childhood programs, according to the **2021 KIDS COUNT® Data Book**, a 50-state report published today by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

“Though the Commonwealth made progress on a number of indicators of child well-being between 2010 and 2019, rankings show we are not making progress as quickly as other states – and that progress is in jeopardy unless federal and state policymakers act boldly to sustain the beginnings of pandemic recovery efforts,” said Dr. Terry Brooks, executive director of Kentucky Youth Advocates. “The supplemental pandemic-era survey data highlighted in the *Data Book* gives us a clearer picture of how families are faring today, including the disproportionate impact the pandemic has had on families of color.”

The latest edition of the *Data Book* ranks the Commonwealth 37th in the nation in overall child well-being, further emphasizing that simply returning to a pre-pandemic status quo is insufficient in realizing our vision of making Kentucky the best place in America to be a kid.

Sixteen measures across four domains – economic well-being, education, health, and family and community context – are used by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in each year’s *Data Book* to assess child well-being. The annual KIDS COUNT data and rankings represent the most recent information available, but do not capture the impact of the past year. Kentucky ranks:

- **40th in ECONOMIC WELL BEING:** In 2019, 22% of children lived in households with an income below the federal poverty line.
- **30th in EDUCATION:** In 2017-2019, 60% of 3- to 4-year-olds were not enrolled in a nursery school, preschool, or kindergarten program.
- **35th in HEALTH:** In 2019, 96% of children under age 19 had health insurance while approximately 45,000 remained uninsured.

- **43rd in FAMILY AND COMMUNITY CONTEXT:** In 2019, 11% of children lived in families where the head of household lacks a high school diploma.

Household Pulse Survey data collected over the past year inform how Kentucky’s children and families continue to be affected by the pandemic:

- In 2020, one in five (20%) Kentucky adults with children in their household had little or no confidence in their ability to pay their next rent or mortgage payment, with the highest rates experienced by Black families (40%) and Latinx families (30%). However, by March 2021, the statewide rate was at 15%, suggesting the beginnings of a recovery.
- Fifteen percent of Kentucky households with children reported sometimes or often not having enough food to eat throughout 2020 – a family stressor that hit Black households (26%) and a combination of smaller racial groups (American Indian, Alaska Native, Pacific Islander, Native Hawaiian and those of more than one race) the hardest (at 29%). This statistic only slightly improved overall in March 2021 to 13%.
- Additionally, over one in four (26%) Kentucky adults living in households with children felt down, depressed, or hopeless in 2020, with only slight improvement (22%) by March 2021.

“The Commonwealth can and will bounce back from the ripple effects of the pandemic, and a key component of that is ensuring kids and families have the resources to meet basic needs and overcome daily challenges. Kentucky communities will only become stronger with the continued thoughtful leadership of the Governor and General Assembly that has led to smart investments of federal funds into addressing the pervasive digital divide, supporting our fragile child care sector, and ensuring schoolchildren have access to food while learning at home through the Pandemic-EBT program,” continued Brooks.

Investing in children, families, and communities must be a priority to ensure an equitable and expansive recovery, including prioritizing communities of color hit hardest by the pandemic. Kentucky Youth Advocates’ recommendations include:

- **Congress should make the expansion of the child tax credit permanent.** The child tax credit has long had bipartisan support, so lawmakers should find common cause and ensure the largest ever anticipated one-year drop in child poverty is not followed by a surge. **Kentucky lawmakers can build on that effort by enacting a state-level refundable earned income tax credit,** an initiative with a proven track record of helping working families meet the basic needs of their children, reducing reliance on government supports, and improving child well-being. Both efforts are critical to eliminating structural inequities in the tax code, especially as more than half of Black children have historically been ineligible for the full Child Tax Credit because their household incomes are too low, while only 23 percent of White children faced this barrier.
- **Kentucky should maintain a focus on increasing access to high-quality child care.** The pandemic has shown that without child care, our families, our communities, and the economy cannot successfully function. American Rescue Plan funds used to stabilize the child care sector should include measures to recruit and retain early care educators, especially as women

of color make up a large percentage of the early childhood workforce and are shouldering the weight of underinvestment.

- **Kentucky should build on the success of the School Safety and Resiliency Act of 2019 and utilize federal funds to improve school-based mental health supports for students.** As students return to in-person instruction with potentially heightened social-emotional health needs, American Rescue Plan funds coming to Kentucky could be used as initial startup or seed investment for school districts to attain the recommended goal of one counselor or school-based mental health provider for every 250 students.
- **Kentucky should expand its school-based nutrition programs, such as Summer-EBT and school breakfast.** The Pandemic-EBT program is successful in connecting students and their families with critical grocery money during virtual learning. Building on that success through a summer EBT program, as well as enacting a policy to allow students the opportunity to eat breakfast during instructional time, would boost efforts to ensure children can concentrate on their learning.
- **Kentucky should allow state employees to access 12 weeks of paid family leave after the birth or adoption of a child.** As a first step measure that provides a model for the private sector, this would allow families to be there for the important first moments of their children's lives while knowing their employment is secure. Currently, Black and Hispanic workers are less likely to have access to paid family leave than White workers. Improving access to paid family leave would boost family and economic stability for all eligible families.
- **Kentucky should double down on efforts to support families involved in the child welfare system.** The pandemic highlighted the increased risk of child maltreatment when opportunities for recognition and prevention are limited, exacerbated the financial strains of kinship caregivers, and compounded hardships for young people aging out of care and seeking stable housing and employment opportunities. Prioritizing and expanding primary prevention and family preservation programming, a strong safety net, and financial supports will provide safety and stability for our most vulnerable Kentuckians.

#### **Release Information**

The *2021 KIDS COUNT® Data Book* will be available June 21 at 12:01 a.m. EDT at [www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org). Additional information is available at [www.aecf.org/databook](http://www.aecf.org/databook). Journalists interested in creating maps, graphs and rankings in can use the KIDS COUNT Data Center at [datacenter.kidscount.org](http://datacenter.kidscount.org).

#### **About Kentucky Youth Advocates**

Kentucky Youth Advocates believes all children deserve to be safe, healthy and secure. As THE independent voice for Kentucky's children, we work to ensure policymakers create investments and policies that are good for children. Learn more at [www.kyyouth.org](http://www.kyyouth.org).

#### **About the Annie E. Casey Foundation**

The Annie E. Casey Foundation creates a brighter future for the nation's children by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling

communities into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow. For more information, visit [www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org). KIDS COUNT® is a registered trademark of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

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