



Giving Every Child A Chance

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COVID-19 Reveals Gaps in Social Safety Net Already Present

NJ Families Still Struggling to Provide Basic Needs Due to COVID, Annie E. Casey Foundation Finds

NEWARK, NEW JERSEY — Though New Jersey is slowly reopening and showing signs of recovery from the pandemic, challenges remain, according to the *2021 KIDS COUNT® Data Book*, a 50-state report of recent household data developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The report analyzes how families have fared between the Great Recession and the COVID-19 crisis, showing that Garden State families with children required urgent attention long before the pandemic.

This year's *Data Book* shows nearly a decade of progress could be impeded by the COVID-19 pandemic unless policymakers act boldly to sustain the beginnings of a recovery from the coronavirus crisis.

As of March 2021, fewer households with children reported having only slight confidence or no confidence that they would be able to make their next rent or mortgage payment on time, dropping from 25% in 2020 to 19%. The most recent data show a promising trend, but data collected throughout 2020 speaks to the inequities worsened by the pandemic. In 2020, 14% of non-Hispanic, white households with children reported slight or no confidence in making an on-time housing payment, compared to 19% of Asian households, 38% of Black households, and 39% of both Hispanic or Latino households and households of two or more races or another race.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed gaps in our social safety net that New Jersey's families have faced for a long time," states Cecilia Zalkind, president and CEO of Advocates for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ), the New Jersey grantee for the KIDS COUNT network. "While we have made strides in areas such as health care access and preschool expansion, the data collected during the pandemic show the areas that will require additional attention in order to ensure that New Jersey's children are fully supported into adulthood."

The *Data Book* shows simply returning to a pre-pandemic level of support for children and families would shortchange millions of kids and fail to address persistent racial and ethnic disparities.



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Sixteen indicators measuring 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:

- **ECONOMIC WELL-BEING:** In 2019, 12%, or roughly 235,000, of New Jersey's children lived in households with an income below the poverty line. This was a decline of 14% since 2010, when 295,000 children lived in impoverished households.
- **EDUCATION:** In 2019, 35% of children ages three and four were not in school, the second lowest in the nation. This is a reflection of New Jersey's robust effort to expand the availability of high-quality public preschool.
- **AFFORDABLE HEALTH CARE:** In 2019, 4% of children, or roughly 88,000 kids, did not have health insurance. This is a result of a statewide effort to identify and eliminate barriers to eligibility and enrolling uninsured children in the state's health insurance program—NJ FamilyCare.
- **FAMILY AND COMMUNITY CONTEXT:** In 2015-2019, 7% of children in New Jersey lived in high poverty areas.

Survey data from the last year add to the story of New Jersey's children and families in this moment:

- During the pandemic, in 2020, 21% of adults in New Jersey's households with children reported feeling down, depressed or hopeless. By March 2021, this figure had improved, but only slightly (to 20%), suggesting that addressing the mental health of families across the state will be an important focus as the pandemic endures.

"The COVID-19 pandemic is the most extraordinary crisis to hit families in decades," said **Lisa Hamilton, president and CEO of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.** "Deliberate policy decisions can help them recover, and we're already seeing the beginnings of that. Policymakers should use this moment to repair the damage the pandemic has caused — and to address long-standing inequities it has exacerbated."

Investing in children, families and communities is a priority to ensure an equitable and expansive recovery. Several of the Foundation's suggestions have already been enacted in the American Rescue Plan, and additional 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 one-year drop ever in child poverty is not followed by a surge.



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- **State and local governments should prioritize the recovery of hard-hit communities of color.**
- **States should expand income support that helps families care for their children.** Permanently extending unemployment insurance eligibility to contract, gig and other workers and expanding state tax credits would benefit parents and children.
- **States that have not done so should expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act.** New Jersey was an early adopter of Medicaid expansion.
- **States should strengthen public schools and pathways to postsecondary education and training.**

Release Information

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

About Advocates for Children of New Jersey

Advocates for Children of New Jersey is the trusted, independent voice putting children's needs first for more than 40 years. Our work results in better laws and policies, more effective funding and stronger services for children and families. And it means that more children are given the chance to grow up safe, healthy and educated. For more information, visit www.acnj.org. Follow ACNJ on Twitter at <http://www.twitter.com/acnjforkids> and on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/acnjforkids>.

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. KIDS COUNT® is a registered trademark of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

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