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Lawmakers must act to ensure Washington's kids can bounce back from pandemic's hardships

New report: Persistent disparities in outcomes must be dismantled to ensure our state's children can thrive

SEATTLE — Washington was performing well in terms of child health outcomes and access to care before the COVID-19 pandemic and was improving in education, according to the **2021 KIDS COUNT® Data Book**, a 50-state report of recent household data developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation analyzing how families have fared between the Great Recession and the COVID-19 crisis.

Yet without continued action by state and federal lawmakers, the pandemic threatens to exacerbate the racial disparities that persist in all areas of children's lives.

Washington ranks fifth in the nation in terms of health access and outcomes for kids. The percentage of babies born at low birth weight has been consistently low for the past decade and was 6.4% in 2019, the second lowest rate in the country. The number of children without health insurance has drastically decreased over the past 10 years. Our state ranked 23rd in 2010 with 7% of children without health insurance; in 2019 that number is down to 3% and Washington is now fifth in the nation. Although the rate was unchanged from the previous year, Washington did see an increase in the *number* of kids without health insurance between 2018-2019. This is a troubling reversal of the progress made in the last decade, during which Washington has been a national leader in child health outcomes.

"Washington's progress in child health coverage over the past decade shows how strong policies like Apple Health for Kids can have a real impact on the lives of kids and families," said Dr. Stephan Blanford, executive director of Children's Alliance, Washington state's co-member of the KIDS COUNT network. "But this year's data show that we are at risk of losing ground. The persistent inequities we see between racial groups are unacceptable. Lawmakers must work to dismantle systemic barriers and allow all of our state's children to thrive."

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.

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.

In contrast to strong performance in children's health, Washington scores below average in education, from pre-school attendance to high school graduation. Well over half of 3- and 4-year-olds were not attending school in 2019, while 19% of high schoolers did not graduate on time. This puts Washington at 23rd and 41st respectively for these performance indicators.

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, 17% of all U.S. children lived in households with an income below the poverty line. In Washington the figure is significantly better at 12%.
- **EDUCATION:** In 2019, 52% of young children across the U.S. were not in school. Washington fares slightly worse than the national average with 54% of our young learners not attending pre-school.
- **AFFORDABLE HEALTH CARE:** In 2019, 6% of U.S. children did not have health insurance. Washington has performed better than the national average in this area and in 2019 only 3% of children were uninsured.
- **FAMILY AND COMMUNITY CONTEXT:** In 2019, 9% of U.S. children lived in high poverty areas (where at least 30% of residents live with incomes below the federal poverty line), while in Washington that figure is 3%.

Black and Indigenous children and children of color in Washington state and across the nation face persistent barriers to opportunity as a result of past and present policy decisions that extract resources from communities of color and channel wealth to white people. So while Washington has performed better than the national average in many areas, the data mask significant racial disparities:

- **ECONOMIC WELL-BEING:** In 2019, 25% of American Indian and Alaska Native, 23% of Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, 21% of Latino children, and 20% of Black or African American children lived in poverty in Washington state, compared with 9% of white children. The data also show that 5% of Asian children lived in poverty, but this aggregate racial category often masks important differences and distinct experiences across Asian communities — with some groups experiencing significantly higher rates of economic hardship.
- **EDUCATION:** Between 2015 and 2019, 66% of Latino and 63% of Black or African American young children in Washington were not in school, compared with 46% of Asian and Pacific Islander kids and 53% of white children.
- **AFFORDABLE HEALTH CARE:** In 2019, 10% of American Indian children in Washington did not have health coverage, a rate at least twice as high as any other racial group.
- **FAMILY AND COMMUNITY CONTEXT:** Between 2015 and 2019, 6% of Latino, 6% of American Indian and 5% of Black or African American children in Washington lived in high poverty areas, compared with 1% of white children.

Survey data collected since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic add to the story of Washington's children and families in this moment, showing how past and present barriers to opportunity are disrupting children's healthy development:

- During the pandemic in 2020, 8% of all adults in Washington with children in the household lacked health insurance. However, the rate of uninsured people in the state's Latino community was much higher at 19%. And, although the overall figure remained unchanged in the first four months of 2021, the percentage increased to 22% among Latinos.
- Access to the internet and digital devices became a significant issue for children and families when schools switched to remote learning during the pandemic. In 2020, 13% of households in Washington did not have internet connection or devices available for children when they were needed, which is three percentage points better than the national average. However, there were large disparities between racial groups. 25% of Black households and 18% of Latino households lacked access, compared to only 11% of white households and 9% of Asian households.
- In 2020, 15% of all Washington families with children had little or no confidence that they could make their next rent or mortgage payment, which is considerably better than the national average of 22%. Yet, the number was as high as 35% for Black or African American families, and 31% for Latino families, compared with just 10% for white families.

Legislative action is needed to address the barriers created by structural racism for kids of color and to set every child in our state on a path to success in school and life.

In the 2021 legislative session, Washington state lawmakers made progress toward mitigating racial injustice embedded in our state's upside-down tax code, with important implications for child well-being. "Together, the passage of the Working Families Tax Credit and a tax on extraordinary profits represent the biggest improvement in Washington's state tax code in at least 90 years," said Misha Werschkul, executive director of the Washington State Budget & Policy Center, the Washington state co-member of the KIDS COUNT network along with Children's Alliance. "With the passing of these bills, 400,000 low- and middle-income Washington households and one in four Washington kids will see a boost in their family income every year. And revenue from a capital gains excise tax (which will be paid by a fraction of the very wealthiest Washingtonians) is going to help fund historic investments in the Fair Start for Kids Act, supporting child care and other services that kids need to thrive."

Investing in children, families and communities is essential to ensure an equitable and expansive recovery. Federal lawmakers made an important down payment on a shared recovery in the American Rescue Plan and state lawmakers took critical steps to balance Washington's upside-down tax code and invest in our state's youngest learners this session — but sustained action is needed. Key recommendations in the *KIDS COUNT Data Book* 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.
- **State and local governments should prioritize the recovery of hard-hit communities of color.** Even as some higher-income, majority white households are beginning to emerge from the COVID-19 crisis, policymakers in Washington state must ensure that protections like the statewide eviction moratorium remain in place to avoid an impending wave of evictions and increased homelessness. They must also ensure that rental assistance and other forms of relief are accessible to communities of color disproportionately struggling to make ends meet.
- **States should expand income support that helps families care for their children.** Permanently extending unemployment insurance eligibility to contract, gig and other workers, and creating a system accessible to undocumented workers would benefit parents and children. So would reducing barriers to Washington state's Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, which currently reaches a fraction of families facing deep poverty.
- **State lawmakers should maintain and expand access to affordable health care** by allowing dental therapists, who currently practice on Tribal lands in Washington, to serve more communities who can't find affordable oral health care. State lawmakers this session created a task force to study how dental therapists, working as community-based oral health professionals, can expand access to affordable, preventive care. More than half of Washington children [have experienced tooth decay](#) by the time they reach third grade, according to the state Department of Health.
- **States should strengthen public schools and pathways to postsecondary education and training.** This includes ensuring that the capital gains excise tax is implemented to support critical investments in early learning, which is foundational to children's success in school and life.

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 KIDS COUNT in WASHINGTON

[KIDS COUNT in Washington](#) is a partnership of the [Children's Alliance](#) and the [Washington State Budget & Policy Center](#), pursuing measurable improvements in child outcomes through equitable public policy measures. The two organizations offer policymakers and the public the knowledge they need to remove the barriers kids face to brighter, freer, more equal futures. For more information, visit www.kidscountwa.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. KIDS COUNT® is a registered trademark of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

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