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Pandemic Deepens Challenges for Wisconsin Families

New Data Shows Hope for Recovery, But Stalled Progress and Racial Disparities Persist

MADISON, Wisconsin – During the pandemic in 2020, 17% of Wisconsin households with children reported little or no confidence in their ability to pay their next rent or mortgage payment on time, and 21% reported symptoms of depression. The Household Pulse Survey data, detailed in the *2021 KIDS COUNT® Data Book* (<https://www.aecf.org/databook>) from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, shows both the depth of families' struggles during the pandemic, and the beginnings of a state and national recovery. This year's *Data Book* illustrates that recent improvement in well-being for our nation's children could be erased by the COVID-19 pandemic, unless policymakers continue to act boldly to amplify the beginnings of a recovery from the coronavirus crisis.

"The challenge before us is whether we can capitalize on signs of recovery from the devastating impact of the pandemic, ensure that recovery is equitable, and set new expectations for progress on key measures that were stalled pre-pandemic," said Erica Nelson, Kids Count Director at Kids Forward.

Signs of recovery are stronger within Wisconsin than nationally, according to survey results from April - December 2020 versus March of 2021. Wisconsin families with children reporting that they did not have enough food to eat in the past two weeks dropped from 11% to 6% (from 14% to 13% nationally), and Wisconsin families with children reporting little or no confidence in their ability to pay their next rent or mortgage payment on time dropped from 17% to 8% (from 22% to 18% nationally). However, this "recovery" does not extend to all Wisconsinites. Our state's substantial racial and ethnic disparities show no signs of abating. Compared to white families with children in Wisconsin during 2020,

- percentages of African American families with children reporting food insecurity and housing instability were four times higher;
- percentages of Latina and Latino families with children reporting food insecurity and housing instability were at least two times higher.

National data shows these disparities have continued into 2021 across the United States, and similar disparities were identified in a recent state level report from Kids Forward (<https://kidsforward.org/assets/Final-WI-Pandemic-Pain-Points-3.22.21.pdf>).

In addition to the Household Pulse data, indicators tracked annually in the *KIDS COUNT Data Book* reveal that progress for Wisconsin's children had stalled long before COVID-19. From the latest data, an estimated 275,000 children in Wisconsin (22%) were living in families with a high housing burden (30% or more of their income is spent on housing), an estimated 266,000 children (21%) were living in families with parents lacking full-time, year-round employment, and an estimated 168,000 children (14%) experienced poverty. These measures of child well-being in Wisconsin remain remarkably similar to last year's report, signifying that more aggressive steps need to be taken to improve conditions for family stability and prosperity.

Because we have not made the deep structural changes required to address systemic racism, racial and ethnic disparities in these KIDS COUNT indicators have also persisted. More than a third of African American children (36%), a quarter of Latina and Latino children (25%), and a sixth of Asian American children (17%) in Wisconsin continue to experience poverty. Half of Wisconsin's African American children (50%) and a third of Latina and Latino children (33%) were living in families with a high housing burden. Around half of African American children (48%) and over a quarter of Latina and Latino children (27%) were living with parents lacking secure employment. Compared to white children in Wisconsin,

- percentages of children experiencing poverty were four and a half times higher among African American children, three times higher among Latina and Latino children, and two times higher among Asian American children;
- percentages of children in families with a high housing burden were three times higher among African American children and two times higher among Latina and Latino children;
- percentages of children living with parents lacking secure employment were three times higher among African American children and nearly two times higher among Latina and Latino children.

Perhaps most striking was the fact that only 1% of Wisconsin's white children were living in high poverty areas, compared to 35% of African American children and 18% of Latina and Latino children.

The *Data Book* concludes that returning to a pre-pandemic level of support for children and families would shortchange millions of kids and fail to remedy persistent racial and ethnic disparities. We must center equity in our recovery planning, support President Biden's American Families Plan, and take action to prioritize those routinely marginalized during economic recoveries. Kids Forward calls on our communities and policy makers to advocate for the following:

- fully expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act;
- raise Wisconsin's minimum wage and expand the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC);
- expand affordable housing initiatives;
- reform unemployment insurance to cover all workers and preserve labor rights;
- increase access to high-quality, affordable early education for all children.

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 Forward

Kids Forward is a statewide child and family policy advocacy organization that has operated in Wisconsin for 140 years. Kids Forward advocates for effective, long-lasting solutions that break down barriers to success for children and families in Wisconsin, notably children and families of color and those furthest from opportunity. Using research and a community-informed approach, Kids Forward strives for a Wisconsin where every kid, every family, and every community can thrive.

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.

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