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West Virginia KIDS COUNT

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

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West Virginia's Child and Family Well-Being Imperiled by Poverty and Pandemic

Data Across 50 States Show Struggles with Poverty, Housing Affordability, But Hopes for Recovery Remain, Annie E. Casey Foundation Finds

CHARLESTON, WEST VIRGINIA— Twenty-six percent of West Virginia's adults with children in the household reported they felt down, depressed or hopeless in March 2021 as the COVID-19 pandemic continued. This is just one percentage point lower than the rate from 2020, during the height of the pandemic, 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.

Nationally, 22% of adults with children in the household reported they felt down, depressed or hopeless during the pandemic in March 2021 compared to 23% in 2020. West Virginians' struggle with the pandemic was compounded by pre-pandemic challenges. In fact, West Virginia ranks 44th in overall child well-being in this year's *Data Book*, whose rankings are based on data from 2019, immediately before the pandemic began. The ranking of 44th was unchanged from the previous year.

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

Even before the pandemic, thousands of West Virginia's children were growing up in families who were unable to meet their most basic needs. In 2019, 70,000 West Virginia children were living in poverty, 20% of the state's population.

On a family level, poverty causes stressors such as insecurity in food, housing, income and more. These stressors can also cause an increased risk of mental health problems and

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substance abuse in the parents, which can lead to child abuse and neglect. In West Virginia, referrals to Child Protective Services in 2019 neared 42,000. That figure [plummeted by about 8,600 in 2020](#) to 33,400. Although this seemingly sounds positive, when children were out of sight of safe adults such as teachers and counselors, abuse was not being reported. We know this because when schools reopened and kids were back in sight of teachers, counselors, coaches and friends, referrals climbed sharply.

“With isolation from loved ones, job loss, health risks, virtual schooling and childcare centers closing, parents and caregivers had to balance educating and caring for their children in unprecedented ways. With balance comes stress, depression and sometimes abuse,” said Tricia Kingery, executive director of WV KIDS COUNT, West Virginia’s member of the KIDS COUNT network. “During summer break, parents, neighbors, coaches and caring adults should watch for signs of abuse and neglect so they can be the one vulnerable children can count on.” To report child abuse or neglect in West Virginia, call 1-800-352-6513.

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. 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, 70,000 West Virginia children lived in households with an income below the poverty line. Nationally, this ranks West Virginia at 40th in comparison with other states.
- **EDUCATION:** In 2018-19, 9% of West Virginia high school students did not graduate on time. Nationally, this ranks West Virginia third in comparison with other states.
- **AFFORDABLE HEALTH CARE:** In 2019, 13,000 children did not have health insurance. Nationally, this ranks West Virginia fourth in comparison with other states.
- **FAMILY AND COMMUNITY CONTEXT:** In 2019, 39,000 children lived in high poverty areas. Nationally, this ranks West Virginia 39th in comparison with other states.
- During the pandemic, in 2020, 10% of adults with children in the household lacked health insurance. However, by March 2021, this figure had risen to 15%, suggesting job loss and/or lack of affordable insurance.
- During the pandemic, in 2020, 20% of households with children said they had only slight confidence or no confidence that they would be able to make their next rent or mortgage payment on time. However, by March 2021, this figure had fallen to 15%, reflecting positive momentum.

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“West Virginia’s well-being depends on ensuring all kids and families can thrive in a post-pandemic world,” said Kingery.” Policymakers can use this moment to invest in programs that provide economic opportunity for parents and equal opportunity for children.

Investing in children, families and communities is a priority to ensure an equitable and expansive recovery. Several of the Annie E. Casey 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.
- **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.** The American Rescue Plan offers incentives to do so.
- **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 West Virginia KIDS COUNT

We are now in our 31st year of championing our vision to make West Virginia a great place to be a kid! Our mission serves us well: Providing the most trusted data about the well-being of West Virginia’s children and building alliances to advocate for what our kids need. So many incredible West Virginians believe in and support that mission.

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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