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Contact: Carter Ashforth, cashforth@childrennow.org, (510) 763-2444 x 108

California Ranks in Bottom Third of States in Child Well-Being as Youth Depression and Anxiety Jump By 70%

OAKLAND — California ranks 33rd in child well-being, according to the **2022 KIDS COUNT® Data Book**, a 50-state report of recent household data developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation analyzing how children and families are faring.

The annual report focuses this year on youth mental health, concurring with a recent assessment by the U.S. Surgeon General that the country is facing a youth mental health crisis. California kids experienced the second largest increase in depression and anxiety among all states, with 7.0% of children ages 3–17 diagnosed with depression or anxiety in 2016, increasing to 11.9% in 2020. In comparison, youth with depression or anxiety rose by 26% nationwide between 2016 and 2020.

Racial and ethnic disparities in access to care and exposure to both overt and systemic racism contribute to additional mental health and wellness burdens for children of color. The suicide rate among Black youth in California has dramatically increased in recent years; in 2020 the suicide rate for Black children was 12.3 per 100,000 youth, nearly *twice* the rate for other Californian children (6.6 per 100,000).¹ Further, many LGBTQ+² young people encounter mental health challenges such as bullying and family rejection; while 41% of California heterosexual high school students reported feeling sad or hopeless almost every day for two or more weeks in a row, 75% of LGBTQ+ students reported such feelings³.

“Not only are we seeing a significant increase in the need for mental health services, but California’s kids are also facing too many barriers accessing these critical services. In fact, 65% of California youth with major depression do not receive any mental health treatment due to lack of access to services.⁴ The State must treat this issue like the emergency it is, and increase children’s access to mental health services now.” said Ted Lempert, president of Children Now, California’s member of the KIDS COUNT network.

Each year, the *Data Book* presents national and state data from 16 indicators in four domains — economic well-being, education, health, and family and community factors — and ranks the states according to how children are faring overall. The data in this year’s report are a mix of pre-pandemic and more recent figures and are the latest available.

¹ California Department of Public Health (2021). Suicide in California – data trends in 2020, COVID impact, and prevention strategies. Retrieved from <https://www.psn youth.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Suicide-in-California-Data-Trends-in-2020-COVID-Impact-and-Prevention-Strategies-Slide-Deck-1.pdf>.

² *Youth online: High school YRBS - California 2019 results | DASH | CDC*. (2019). <https://nccd.cdc.gov/youthonline/app/Results.aspx?LID=CA>

³ *High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2019*. (2020, October 27). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/index.htm>.

⁴ Mental Health America. (2021) *The state of mental health in America 2022*. <https://mhanational.org/research-reports/2022-state-mental-health-america-report>.

California's overall ranking of 33rd (broken down by issue area below) is far too low given California's wealth and leadership in other areas, such as environmentalism, technological innovation, and ensuring equal rights for all:

- **45th in economic well-being:** California continues to be the worst state in the nation for percentage of children living in households that spend more than 30% of their income on housing.
- **37th in education:** The State has slowly improved academic outcomes for students in grades TK-12. However, California must do much more to support academic engagement and progress, especially for children in marginalized groups.
- **7th in health:** California ranks fourth in percentage of children without health insurance, and sixth in percentage of low birth weight babies. Additionally, California's long-term investments in accurate sex education and access to birth control have helped lower the teen birth rate.

"California's national ranking – 33rd in child well-being – is unacceptable. Given that we rank in the top ten states in overall taxes, and with our national leadership in so many other domains, California should be leading the country in child well-being. While we applaud the significant investments and reforms in this year's state budget, our policymakers need to take even stronger action and commit to making California the national leader when it comes to kids," said Lempert.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation calls for lawmakers to heed the Surgeon General's warning and respond by developing programs and policies to ease mental health burdens on children and their families. They urge policymakers to:

- **Prioritize meeting kids' basic needs.** Youth who grow up in poverty are two to three times more likely to develop mental health conditions than their peers. Children need a solid foundation of nutritious food, stable housing and safe neighborhoods — and their families need financial stability — to foster positive mental health and wellness.
- **Ensure every child has access to the mental health care they need, when and where they need it.** Schools should increase the presence of social workers, psychologists and other mental health professionals on staff and strive to meet the 250-to-1 ratio of students to counselors recommended by the American School Counselor Association, and they can work with local health care providers and local and state governments to make additional federal resources available and coordinate treatment.
- **Bolster mental health care that takes into account young people's experiences and identities.** Care should be trauma-informed — designed to promote a child's healing and emotional security — and culturally relevant to the child's life. It should be informed by the latest evidence and research and should be geared toward early intervention, which can be especially important in the absence of a formal diagnosis of mental illness.

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RELEASE INFORMATION

The *2022 KIDS COUNT® Data Book* will be available 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 <http://datacenter.kidscount.org>.

About Children Now

Children Now is a non-partisan, whole-child research, policy development and advocacy organization dedicated to promoting children's health, education and well-being in California. The organization also leads The Children's Movement of California, a network of over 4,800 direct service, parent, youth, civil rights, faith-based and community groups dedicated to improving children's well-being.

ABOUT THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

The Annie E. Casey Foundation creates a brighter future for the nation's young children, youth and young adults 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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