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Colorado ranks 16th in child well-being, but children still face a pandemic of mental health

Data across 50 states show 7.3 million kids with anxiety or depression as effects of coronavirus crisis linger, Annie E. Casey Foundation finds

DENVER — Colorado ranks 16th in the nation in overall 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. However, children are in the midst of a mental health crisis, struggling with anxiety and depression at unprecedented levels. This year, the annual report focuses on youth mental health, concurring with a recent assessment by the U.S. surgeon general that conditions amount to a youth mental health pandemic.

The report sheds light on the health struggles, economic hardships and other challenges affecting American children, in addition to describing how those challenges are more likely to affect children of color. Colorado improved on 11 of the 16 indicators of child and family well-being included in this year's *Data Book*, with notable improvements in its teen birth rate as well as in the share of children living in high poverty neighborhoods. The report also outlines that in the decade preceding the pandemic, Colorado's child poverty rate fell by nearly 30% — one of the largest declines in the nation.

Yet, the state lost ground in other critical areas, including child and teen deaths. Between 2010 and 2020, the mortality rate among Colorado kids ages 1 to 19 increased to 31 deaths per 100,000 children in this age group, up from 25 deaths per 100,000 a decade earlier. This increase was the second-largest in the nation during the time period examined in the report. Although this measure captures deaths due to all causes, Colorado experienced a substantial increase in its youth suicide rate in the years leading up to the pandemic. This trend gravely underscores the need for additional mental health support for our kids and teens.

"Mental health struggles were increasing among Colorado kids and teens even before the COVID-19 pandemic," said Kelly Causey, president and CEO of the Colorado Children's Campaign, Colorado's member of the KIDS COUNT network. "The disruptions that children and families in our state have experienced during the past two years are bound to exacerbate these challenges unless our policymakers invest in the well-being of Colorado kids and their caregivers."

The *Data Book* reports that children across America, and in more than 40 states and the District of Columbia, were more likely to encounter anxiety or depression during the first year of the COVID-19 crisis than previously. The national figure jumped 26%, from 9.4% of children ages 3-17 (5.8 million kids) to 11.8% (7.3 million) between 2016 and 2020, the year COVID-19 swept across the United States. This increase represents 1.5 million more children who are struggling to make it through the day. In Colorado, more than 10% of kids ages 3 to 17 reported experiencing anxiety or depression in 2020, representing more than 109,000 kids who were struggling with their mental health during the first year of the pandemic.

Racial and ethnic disparities contribute to disproportionately troubling mental health and wellness conditions among children of color. Nine percent of high schoolers overall but 12% of Black students, 13% of students of two or more races, and 26% of American Indian or Native Alaskan high schoolers attempted suicide in the year preceding the most recent federal survey. Further, many LGBTQ+ young people continue to encounter challenges as they seek mental health support. Among heterosexual high school students of all races and ethnicities, 6% attempted suicide; the share was 23% for gay, lesbian or bisexual students.

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.

“Mental health is just as important as physical health in a child's ability to thrive,” said Lisa Hamilton, president and CEO of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. “As our nation continues to navigate the fallout from the COVID crisis, policymakers must do more to ensure all kids have access to the care and support they need to cope and live full lives.”

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.** It 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 COLORADO CHILDREN'S CAMPAIGN

The Colorado Children's Campaign is a nonprofit, nonpartisan advocacy organization committed since 1985 to realizing every chance for every child in Colorado. We advocate for the development and implementation of data-driven public policies that improve child well-being in health, education and early childhood. We do this by providing Coloradans with trusted data and research on child well-being and organizing an extensive statewide network of dedicated child advocates. For more information, please visit www.coloradokids.org.

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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