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Contact: Ashlee Niedospial, ashlee@narrative-project.com, (570)-778-5916

Connecticut Ranks 7th in the Nation in Child Well-Being but Children Still Suffering from Mental Health Pandemic

Despite improvements across several indicators of child well-being, Connecticut experienced a 22.6% increase in documented children's anxiety and depression

New Haven — Connecticut ranks 7th in the nation in child well-being; however, in Connecticut and nationwide, the rate of children and young people experiencing anxiety and depression increased in 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic. That's 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 report sheds light on health, economic and other challenges affecting American children as well as how those challenges are more likely to affect children of color. For the first time, this resource focuses on youth mental health, concurring with a recent assessment by the U.S. Surgeon General that conditions amount to a mental health pandemic affecting youth specifically.

“This year’s *Data Book* confirms what we have long feared: Without significant investments in family economic security, Connecticut will continue to lag behind the country’s recovery, and this has very real consequences for our children,” said **Emily Byrne, executive director of Connecticut Voices for Children, Connecticut’s member of the KIDS COUNT network.** “While historic investments were made this year, we cannot let up the urgency to move those resources to communities now as well as pass equitable legislation—in health, housing, justice, education, employment, and tax reform—that prioritizes the economic and mental well-being of children and families next year and future years.”

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, with the national figure jumping 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.

Even prior to the pandemic, in 2016, children and young people in Connecticut had higher rates of anxiety or depression than the national average (11.5% versus 9.4%). Between 2016 and 2020,

Connecticut experienced a 22.6% increase in documented children's anxiety or depression, from 11.5% to 14.1%.

Racial and ethnic disparities contribute to disproportionately troubling mental health and wellness conditions among children of color. Nationally, 9% 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 previous to the pandemic. Further, many LGBTQ+ young people are encountering 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.

The High Points

- **Connecticut ranks 4th in the nation in terms of keeping teens engaged in school/work.** In 2008-12, 6 percent of teens in Connecticut were not attending school and not working. In 2016-20, 5 percent of teens in Connecticut were not attending school and not working (estimated 10,000 young people). This represents a 17 percent increase in the engagement of young people in school and work.
- **Connecticut ranks 4th in the nation in terms of teen births to females ages 15 to 19.** In 2010, the state had 19 teen births per 1,000 teenage females. In 2020, the state had 8 teen births per 1,000 teenage females (882 births total). This represents a 58 percent decline in Connecticut's teen birth rate.
- **Connecticut ranks 4th in the nation in terms of children with health insurance.** The state's percentage of children without health insurance fell between 2008-12 and 2016-20 (from 4% to 3%). This accounts for an estimated 22,000 children.

Need To Watch

- **Connecticut ranks 1st in the nation regarding preschool attendance.** The state increased its rank from #2 in 2008-12 to #1 in 2016-20 (tied with New Jersey). While 37 percent of the state's children ages 3 and 4 were not attending preschool (estimated 29,000 children) in 2020, the early childhood industry was rocked by the pandemic and closures have been widespread in the state (in 2021 and 2022).
- **Connecticut ranks 4th in the nation in terms of 4th grade reading proficiency and 6th in the nation in terms of 8th grade math proficiency.** While the rankings are relatively good, the percentage of children still scoring below proficient on key education metrics is not. In 2019, 61% of 8th graders scored below proficient on the math section of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and 60% of 4th graders scored below proficient on reading, which represents a 3% decline from 2009.
- **Connecticut ranks 12th in the nation in terms of child poverty.** Thirteen percent of children lived in poverty in 2008-12 and that proportion has not changed since 2016-20

(estimated 94,665). However, child poverty has decreased in many other states so Connecticut's child poverty ranking fell from #3 in 2008-12 to #12 in 2016-20.

The Low Points

- **Connecticut ranks 44th in the nation on housing cost-burden.** Dropping two places from #42 to #44, Connecticut continues to see a housing cost-burden problem. While the numbers have actually improved (from 42% in 2008-12 to 34% in 2016-20, an estimated 248,000 children), other states have experienced growth in income and employment while Connecticut has remained relatively stagnant.
- **Connecticut ranks 22nd in the nation for youth obesity.** The percent of youth who are overweight or obese has steadily increased in each year between 2016-17 (when the state ranked fifth best in the country) and 2019-20. It's important to note that there is a statistically significant relationship between childhood body mass index and food insecurity, where children who are food insecure tend to have higher body mass indexes.
- **Connecticut ranks 6th in the nation in terms of teen death rate.** This is a good ranking relative to other states, but the trend is concerning. In 2010, the state rated #1 with 17 child and teen deaths per 100,000 children and teens in Connecticut. In 2020, there were 19 child and teen deaths per 100,000 children and teens in Connecticut (150 deaths total), which represents a 12 percent rate increase.

“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.”

Connecticut Voices for Children joins The Annie E. Casey Foundation in calling 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 family economic security.** The cost of living in Connecticut is higher than other states and children require a wide range of needs on top of the basic needs of food, shelter and safety. More must be done to ensure families can support their children — whether it's through increased employment in good-paying jobs, tax fairness measures that allow families to keep more money in their pockets, or wealth equity measures that close generational poverty.
- **Continue reducing child poverty.** 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. Schools 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.

“When Connecticut invests in children and youth, it sets these children up for success. Connecticut’s investments in early care and education, K-12 education, youth engagement, child health insurance, and children’s behavioral health means that Connecticut leads many states in education and that youth are safe, graduating, and working,” said **Lauren Ruth, research and policy fellow with Connecticut Voices for Children**. “However, Connecticut’s slow recovery from the Great Recession and lower-levels of investment in family economic security—connecting parents to good jobs, affordable housing, and financial offsets for the high cost of raising children—keeps Connecticut from being as great as it can be.”

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 Connecticut Voices for Children

Connecticut Voices for Children is a “think and do” tank working to ensure that Connecticut is a thriving and equitable state, and where all children achieve their full potential. In furtherance of its vision, Connecticut Voices for Children produces high-quality research and analysis, promotes citizen education, advocates for policy change at the state and local level, and works to develop the next generation of leaders.

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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