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Florida Ranks 35th in Child Well-Being

***Share of Florida children with anxiety or depression increased by 21.8% from 2016 to 2020, the first year of the pandemic, Annie E. Casey Foundation finds***

***Florida lawmakers should strengthen the safety net and invest in mental health services to improve the health and well-being of children in the state***

**ORLANDO** — Florida ranks 35th in the nation for 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. This year’s annual 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 for youth.

The report sheds light on the health, economic, and other challenges affecting Florida’s and America’s children as well as how those challenges are more likely to affect children of color.

Among the four domains that make up the index, the state ranks 42nd for economic well-being, 35th for health, 32nd for family and community, and 13th for education.

Although none of the indicators in the **Data Book** explicitly measure mental health, the four domains are intrinsically tied to children’s wellness. The difficulty in trying to put food on the table and afford rent on poverty-level wages, for example, does not just impact the parents in a household — children experience this stress as well.

“The child well-being index shows that one in five children in Florida is living in poverty, and more than one in three lives in a household that spends over 30% of income on rent or a mortgage,” said Norín Dollard, senior policy analyst and KIDS COUNT director at Florida Policy Institute (FPI). “Also, we are just starting to see the harsh effects of the pandemic reflected in data. The economic downturn caused by COVID continues to reverberate in Florida

communities, disproportionately impacting families with low income and Black and Latina/o families.”

The *Data Book* reports that children across America 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) in 2016 to 11.8% (7.3 million) in 2020, the year COVID-19 swept across the United States. In Florida, the share of children ages 3-17 with anxiety or depression increased 21.8%, from 8.7% in 2016 to 10.6% in 2020, representing a total of more than 376,000 young people who are struggling to make it through the day.

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 prior 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.

“By investing in mental health services and strengthening the safety net, state lawmakers can help ensure that children in Florida will be able to thrive,” added Dollard.

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.

Robert D. Bridges, EVP & Chief Executive- FL Operations, Nemours Children's Health added, "As the third largest state in the nation, Florida should aspire to be a destination for our children. We must continue to make meaningful investments through the critical years of development and education, to increase the likelihood that our children will grow into productive adults. Now is the time for Florida to take the biggest leap yet and lead other states for a better future."

[FPI](#), the state's KIDS COUNT® partner, is an independent, nonpartisan and nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing state policies and budgets that improve the economic mobility and quality of life for all Floridians.

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](http://www.aecf.org).

KIDS COUNT® is a registered trademark of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

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#### **RELEASE INFORMATION**

The *2022 KIDS COUNT® Data Book* will be available at [www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org). Additional information is available at [www.aecf.org/databook](http://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>.