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Kentucky Ranks 37th in Child Well-Being with Too Many Children Suffering from Mental Health Pandemic

Latest data show 16% of Kentucky kids face anxiety or depression, as effects of the coronavirus crisis linger, Annie E. Casey Foundation finds

LOUISVILLE— The latest available data show that as the COVID-19 pandemic began impacting Kentucky and the rest of the nation, the Commonwealth was showing progress in some areas of child well-being as well as ongoing challenges, according to the **2022 KIDS COUNT® Data Book**, released today by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. While the 50-state report on how children and families are faring shows measurable improvements in Kentucky family economic well-being and children without health insurance, the Commonwealth is falling short in having 3- and 4-year-olds in early childhood programs, curbing youth obesity, and fourth-grade students reading proficiently.

“Though the Commonwealth made progress on a number of indicators of child well-being over the past decade, rankings continue to show that we are not making progress as quickly as other states. In fact, Kentucky is in the bottom 10 of states for six of the 16 indicators,” said Dr. Terry Brooks, executive director of Kentucky Youth Advocates. “All kids deserve the chance to thrive, no matter their zip code, race, or family’s income. That vision will only come to fruition when our lawmakers prioritize what’s best for all kids and families. That means that Kentucky laws are written by Kentuckians and not by external national groups. That means the interests of vulnerable kids are the priority and rather than succumbing to the influence of dark money. Whether you are an elected legislative leader or a candidate for Governor, there can be no more ethical priority than the interests of Kentucky’s boys and girls.”

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 latest edition of the *Data Book* ranks the Commonwealth 37th in the nation in overall child well-being, further emphasizing the urgency to put kids first in every policy and state investment decision. Kentucky ranks:

- **38th in Economic Well-Being:** In 2016-2020, 22% of Kentucky children lived in households with an income below the federal poverty line and nearly one in four (24%) children lived in a household that spends more than 30% of their income on housing.

Kentucky's independent voice for kids

- **26th in Education:** In 2016-2020, 59% of 3- to 4-year-olds in Kentucky were not enrolled in a nursery school, preschool, or kindergarten program. In 2019, 65% of Kentucky fourth graders scored below proficient reading levels.
- **38th in Health:** In 2016-2020, 96% of Kentucky children under age 19 had health insurance. In 2019-2020, 39% of children and teens ages 10-17 were overweight or obese.
- **42nd in Family and Community Context:** In 2016-2020, 14% of children lived in a high-poverty area, which is an adverse community environmental factor that impacts a child's ability to thrive.

The report sheds light on the health, economic, and other challenges affecting children as well as how those challenges are more likely to affect children of color. And, for the first time, this annual resource focuses on youth mental health, concurring with a recent assessment by U.S. surgeon general that conditions for youth amount to a "mental health pandemic."

The *Data Book* reports that children across the Commonwealth and the nation were more likely to encounter anxiety or depression during the first year of the COVID-19 crisis than previously, with the Commonwealth's figure jumping 28%, from 12.4% of children ages 3-17 to 15.9% between 2016 and 2020. This increase represents 29,000 more children 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. Nearly one in 10 (9%) of high schoolers overall but 12% of Black students and 13% of students of two or more races attempted suicide in the year previous to the most recent national survey. Further, many LGBTQ young people are encountering challenges as they seek mental health support. Among heterosexual high school students of all races and ethnicities nationally, 6% attempted suicide; the share was 23% for gay, lesbian or bisexual students.

"The pandemic years have taken a toll on everyone — from our health professionals and educators to our families — including the rising crisis in mental health for children and youth. And, in addition to experiencing mental health challenges as a result of the pandemic, children still contend with the conditions that were making life harder well before the coronavirus — such as poverty, community violence, and hunger. Policymakers must continue to prioritize policies and investments that ease mental health burdens on children and their families — and don't leave anyone behind," said Brooks.

Kentucky Youth Advocates calls on state and federal lawmakers 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. Kentucky can ensure access to paid family leave and high-quality affordable child care and protect critical safety net programs.
- **Ensure every child has access to the mental health care they need, when and where they need it.** Kentucky should build on recent efforts to improve school safety and student resiliency by supporting schools as they work to increase the presence of social workers, psychologists, and other mental health professionals. With passage of the bipartisan [Senate Bill 102](#) in 2022, schools must now track the number of their mental health professionals to meet the 250-to-1 ratio of students to counselors recommended by the American School Counselor Association. Kentucky school districts can better utilize the [Expanded Access Services program](#), which allows schools to leverage federal Medicaid dollars to provide and reimburse for health, dental, behavioral health, and other medically necessary services provided through an in person or virtual school setting.
- **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.

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>.

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ABOUT KENTUCKY YOUTH ADVOCATES

Kentucky Youth Advocates believes all children deserve to be safe, healthy, and secure. As the independent voice for Kentucky’s children, we work to ensure policymakers create investments and policies that are good for children. Learn more at kyyouth.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.