



**UNDER EMBARGO Until August 8, 2022 at 12:01 a.m. ET**

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### **Pandemic and Economic Insecurity Threaten Louisiana Children's 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*

**NEW ORLEANS** — Louisiana ranks 49<sup>th</sup> 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.

Children in America are in the midst of a mental health crisis, struggling with anxiety and depression at unprecedented levels. For the first time, this annual resource focuses on youth mental health, concurring with a recent assessment by U.S. surgeon general that conditions amount to a youth “*mental health pandemic*.”

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

“Our state has the power to set children on the path to success by connecting them to appropriate mental health care and early intervention services,” said Jen Roberts, CEO of Agenda for Children, Louisiana's member of the KIDS COUNT network. “Unfortunately, Louisiana's children are not only contending with the one-two punch of a pandemic followed by the devastation of Hurricane Ida, they also face the challenge of trying to find appropriate mental health care in a state where three out of every four residents live in a mental health care provider shortage area.”

While Louisiana improved in 10 out of the 16 measures tracked in the annual *Data Book*, the state ranked among the bottom 10 states in all but four indicators. Two of the state's best rankings reflected long-standing federal and state commitments to providing children with access to essential service: young children not in school (9<sup>th</sup>) and children without health insurance (17<sup>th</sup>).

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. The *Data Book* found that, as of 2020, 10.1% of Louisiana children ages 3-17 (91,000 children) had been diagnosed with depression or anxiety.

Racial and ethnic disparities contribute to disproportionately troubling mental health and wellness conditions among children of color. Nationally, nearly 10% 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 most recent federal 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, 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.

“Our consistently poor ranking in the *Data Book* underscores the need for our state to provide a much more comprehensive approach to meeting children’s basic needs,” said Courtney Rogers, Director of Policy and Advocacy at Agenda for Children. “Louisiana policymakers missed a critical opportunity during the 2022 legislative session to build a stronger foundation for children and families when they prioritized physical infrastructure projects over our human infrastructure as they allocated stimulus dollars. We need our legislators to put Louisiana children first by investing in initiatives that support kids and families, such as paid family and medical leave, affordable housing initiatives and robust expansion of mental health services.”

The 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](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>.

**ABOUT AGENDA FOR CHILDREN**

Agenda for Children, a private nonprofit organization, works to make Louisiana a state in which all children can thrive. Visit [www.agendaforchildren.org](http://www.agendaforchildren.org) to learn more.

**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](http://www.aecf.org). KIDS COUNT® is a registered trademark of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

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