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Montana Ranks 20th in Child Well-Being, but Children Still Suffering from Mental Health Pandemic

Montana continues to rank in the middle of the pack for children's 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. Compared to a decade ago, Montana has improved in many areas of children's well-being; however, thousands of families still struggle to afford housing, and many make poverty-level wages. Another area of significant concern is that children are struggling with anxiety and depression at unprecedented levels. The annual resource focuses this year on youth mental health, concurring with a recent assessment by the U.S. surgeon general that conditions amount to a youth mental health pandemic.

Data from the report show that many Montana youth experience mental health challenges. In 2020, more than one in eight Montana children experienced depression or anxiety. The teen suicide death rate is another measure of mental health challenges for youth. Between 2018 and 2020, Montana teens had the highest suicide death rate the state has ever seen at 27 suicides per 100,000. Nationally, the teen suicide death rate is 11 per 100,000.

"The data has shown for years that Montana youth struggle with mental health. Better support for mental health services is becoming increasingly urgent as we see the trends get even worse," said Xanna Burg, Director of KIDS COUNT with the Montana Budget & Policy Center. "We're talking about nearly 26,000 children age 3 to 17 that have depression or anxiety, and that's up 7 percent from 2016."

Racial and ethnic disparities exist in mental health and wellness among youth of color. Ten percent of Montana high schoolers overall but 17 percent of Latinx students, 15 percent of American Indian or Alaska Native students, and 12 percent of students of two or more races attempted suicide in 2019. Further, many LGBTQ+ young people encounter challenges seeking mental health support. Nationally, among heterosexual high school students of all races and ethnicities, 6 percent attempted suicide; the share was 23 percent for gay, lesbian, or bisexual students. Unfortunately, data specific to LGBTQ+ youth in Montana is not available.

Additional highlights from the report findings for Montana include:

- **Economic:** About 52,000 Montana lived in households that paid more than 30 percent of their income on housing.

- **Education:** More than half (59 percent) of 3- and 4-year-old children did not attend a preschool, ranking Montana 40th in the nation.
- **Health:** More than 14,000 Montana children lacked health insurance. Health insurance coverage has improved since a decade ago, but progress has stalled in recent years.
- **Family and Community:** The teen birth rate dropped to a record low in 2020.

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 considers 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 Montana KIDS COUNT

Montana KIDS COUNT is a leading resource for data on child and family well-being in the state and is dedicated to providing current, relevant, and reliable data to shape the issues affecting Montana children and families. More information can be found at montanakidscount.org/. Montana KIDS COUNT is a project of the Montana Budget & Policy Center, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization providing in-depth research and analysis on budget, tax, and economic issues. More information can be found at www.montanabudget.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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