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North Carolina makes headway against child poverty, but children now face a mental health pandemic, report says

North Carolina children and families need swift action from policy makers to respond to a rising child and youth mental health crisis, according to a new report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation

Raleigh, NC — Policies designed to bolster family economic security in 2020 worked, 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. However, the report shows children in North Carolina are experiencing a mental health crisis, struggling with anxiety or depression at unprecedented levels. More than one in 10 children ages 3 to 17 were diagnosed with depression or anxiety in 2020, a marked increase over past years that reflects the stresses of the 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. This year's resource focuses on youth mental health, concurring with a recent assessment by the U.S. surgeon general that conditions amount to a youth mental health pandemic.

"We met the challenge of child poverty by investing in policies and programs proven to work in 2020, which was a time of massive financial stress for many American families. We have the tools to meet the challenges of the youth mental health crisis now," said Kaylan Szafranski, Health Policy Director at NC Child. "This year's *Data Book* shows that the need for comprehensive, wrap-around care, including mental health care, is urgent for our state's families."

Greater family economic security is within reach

The percent of children living in poverty in North Carolina fell from 24% in 2008-11 to 20% 2016-20, a significant decrease that Kaylan Szafranski, Health Program Director at NC Child, North Carolina's member of the KIDS COUNT network, says is due in large part to substantial relief measures like the Economic Impact Payments to families and emergency rental assistance. However, today, as North Carolina families struggle with increasing grocery and housing prices, most of the programs that helped low-income families keep their homes and keep food on the table during the pandemic are expiring.

"The data show that we do not have to accept child poverty as a given," said Szafranski. "We have the tools to fight poverty, and they work."

A growing child and youth mental health crisis in North Carolina

The *Data Book* reports that children across the country 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 to 11.8% between 2016 and 2020, the year COVID-19 swept across the country.

Racial and ethnic disparities contribute to disproportionately troubling mental health and wellness conditions among children of color. In North Carolina, 9.7% of high schoolers overall but 15.4% of Latinx students and 15.6% of students of two or more races attempted suicide in the year previous to the

pandemic, which is the most recent available data. Further, many LGBTQ young people are encountering challenges as they seek mental health support. Among heterosexual high school students of all races and ethnicities, 8.2% attempted suicide; the share was 21.5% for gay and lesbian or bisexual students.

“Children deserve a chance to thrive regardless of race, ethnicity or sexual orientation,” said Szafranski. “This crisis is daunting, but we can rise to this moment for our kids. One way to do this is to expand Medicaid. When parents are insured, kids are more likely to be insured and get the care they need. Another action step is to make sure schools have adequate counseling staff to meet kids where they are.”

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.

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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>. 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.

ABOUT NC CHILD

NC Child is a nonprofit organization that advances public policies to ensure that every child in North Carolina has the opportunity to thrive, whatever their race, ethnicity, or place of birth. For more information, visit www.ncchild.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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