



Voices for Children in Nebraska

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

Contact: Juliet Summers, jsummers@voicesforchildren.com 402-597-3100

Nebraska Ranks First Among States in Child Economic Well-Being, but Youth Mental Health Diagnoses are on the Rise

Nebraska policies better supported families in maintaining economic security through the early pandemic than other states, but racial and ethnic disparities persist, a report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation finds.

OMAHA, NEBRASKA — Nebraska leads all fifty states in promoting child economic well-being, according to the **2022 KIDS COUNT® Data Book**, a national report of recent data released today by the Annie E. Casey Foundation analyzing how children and families are faring. 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. 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.

Between 2016-2020, only 12% of Nebraska children lived in poverty, a decrease from 17% between the years 2008-2012, and one of the lowest percentages in the nation. Twenty percent of children in Nebraska lived in households where no parent had full-time, year-round employment, and 20% lived in a household with a high housing cost burden (defined as 30% or more of the family income), both also very low rates when compared with other states. Nebraska also did better than any other state at supporting older teens to either remain in school or find employment.

However, advocates say that isn't the full story. "When we look at our data as a whole, it paints a rosy picture of our state policy decisions that supported families in the early pandemic, during an unprecedented time in our history," said Juliet Summers, Executive Director at Voices for Children in Nebraska, "But when we dig further, we see we those policies didn't go nearly far enough for children and families of color."

Summers points to 2020 data from the U.S. Census Annual Community Survey, a different data set from the estimates provided in the *Data Book*, showing that in Nebraska, 30.5% of Black or African American children, 28.9% of American Indian or Alaska Native children, and 23% of Hispanic or Latino children are growing up in poverty. White, non-Hispanic children in Nebraska, by contrast, have a poverty rate of 7.4%.

"Getting ranked first is something we should be proud of, but this isn't a moment to rest on those laurels," Summers concludes. "We hope our policymakers take home the message that policies supporting child well-being are good for Nebraska, and there is substantial work still to be done to ensure every family in every community in our state experiences 'the Good Life'."

This year's *Data Book* also highlights how children in Nebraska and the country as a whole 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*." In Nebraska, the percent of children experiencing anxiety or depression jumped by 28% from 8.1% in 2016 to 10.4% in 2020.

This increase mirrors a national trend. 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.

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 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.

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>.

ABOUT VOICES FOR CHILDREN IN NEBRASKA

Voices for Children in Nebraska is the independent voice building pathways to opportunity for all children and families through research, policy, and community engagement. Our policy priorities are guided by research, data and proven best practices that improve child wellbeing. We pay close attention to the impact of race, poverty and geography, and seek to address existing disparities within these issue areas. For more information about Voices for Children visit www.voicesforchildren.com.

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

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