



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

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More than 10% of NJ Children Struggling with Mental Health Issues Since the Start of the Pandemic, Requiring Urgent Action

New report released by national nonprofit Annie E. Casey Foundation finds that almost 7.3 million children across the nation now struggle with anxiety or depression

Newark, NJ — New Jersey maintains its strong reputation related to education, health, and family and community, ranking sixth in the nation for child health and 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. However, children in America, including New Jersey, 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.

In New Jersey, nearly 168,000 children, or 10.7%, were struggling with anxiety and depression in 2020. This is up from 7.6% of children, or more than 130,000, in 2016. In order to address this growing problem, the state’s recently passed FY2023 budget includes \$50 million in federal dollars to strengthen youth mental health supports. In addition, a new federal- and state-supported mental health hotline, 9-8-8, recently launched, connecting individuals to a network of trained crisis counselors.

“Though we are encouraged to see that the state’s budget has allocated federal dollars toward strengthening youth mental health programs, more must be done. The pandemic has had a profound effect on the mental state of New Jersey’s children,” said Cecilia Zalkind, president and CEO of Advocates for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ), a statewide nonprofit that works with local, state and federal leaders to identify and implement changes that will benefit New Jersey’s children. “Regularly, we hear the struggles of families and children who are combating anxiety and depression caused and magnified by a global crisis. Programs such as mental health services play a critical role in moving the state forward past COVID-19, but we need to do more to address the shortage of providers for mental health services.”

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.



Nationally, racial and ethnic disparities contribute to disproportionately troubling mental health and wellness conditions among children of color. 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.

Overall, New Jersey did better than the total national numbers in all indicators of child well-being except for percentage of income spent on housing. It ranked sixth in the nation. Across indicators:

- **Education:** New Jersey ranked first in the nation for its commitment to educating young minds. However, 37% of three- and four-year-olds are not attending preschool, despite the state offering universal preschool to many high-need communities. The latest budget included \$68 million for preschool education aid, with \$40 million of those dollars earmarked for eligible new districts interested in expanding preschool.
- **Economic Well-Being:** The state continues to struggle, ranking 22nd. In 2016-20, 36% (701,000) of children lived in households that spend more than 30% of their income on housing.
- **Health:** New Jersey ranks ninth for children's health, and shows continued positive momentum — the number of low birth weight babies saw a 6% decrease between 2010 (8,814) and 2020 (7,563). The First Lady's Nurture New Jersey initiative, highlighting the need to address maternal and infant health outcomes, recently received funding as part of the FY2023 budget — an encouraging step forward for New Jersey's children and families. As the Murphy Administration implements Phase 2 of its Cover All Kids Initiative, helping children across the state access health coverage, 4% of children did not have health insurance in 2016-20 (81,000), on par with the national average of 5% during that same period.
- **Family and Community:** The Garden State ranks 16th for families and communities, with data showing average results. Teen births to females ages 15 to 19 have continued to decline from 5,793 to 2,450 — an encouraging trend.

The 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 ADVOCATES FOR CHILDREN OF NEW JERSEY

Advocates for Children of New Jersey is the trusted, independent voice putting children’s needs first for more than 40 years. Our work results in better laws and policies, more effective funding and stronger services for children and families. And it means that more children are given the chance to grow up safe, healthy and educated. For more information, visit www.acnj.org.

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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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