



Children's
Advocacy
ALLIANCE

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**NATIONAL STUDY SHOWS NEVADA STUDENTS IMPROVING IN KEY AREAS,
BUT RISK SETBACKS DUE TO 'MENTAL HEALTH PANDEMIC'**

Reading and early school attendance numbers trend upward, but mental health struggles and critical lack of mental health access, especially in rural areas, could reverse gains

LAS VEGAS, NEVADA — Over the last decade, efforts to improve educational outcomes for Nevada children have begun to pay off, especially for the number of children ages three to four attending school and fourth graders reading at proficiency, 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, 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 the U.S. surgeon general that likens the 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.

Nevada's complex education landscape remains an opportunity to improve conditions for children. In reducing the number of fourth graders below reading proficiency by 9% over the last decade, the state's ranking for that particular indicator has moved from #46 to #41. Other movements among rankings show that early investments in early childhood continue to make a difference, with the percentage of 3- and 4-year-olds not in school falling from 76% a decade ago to 69% in 2019. While these numbers are encouraging, there is more work to do, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We are thrilled to see incremental gains in education, and among other indicators that we know are crucial for Nevada's children,” said Dr. Tiffany Tyler-Garner, Executive Director of Children's Advocacy Alliance, Nevada's member of the KIDS COUNT network. “However, the troubling data on mental health show how easily these gains could be reversed. Mental health has a ripple effect in its impact on our youth. It affects academic performance, familial relationships, and behavioral issues: 79% of children in the juvenile justice system meet the criteria to be diagnosed with a mental health disorder.”

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.

Data for Nevada from the Brookings Mountain West and The Lincy Institute found one school mental health professional available for every 1,866 students, with a recommended ratio of 1:500. It also found the lowest availability of school social workers in the Mountain West with one professional social worker for every 8,730 students, instead of the recommended ratio of 1:250.

The *Data Book* reports on children diagnosed with anxiety or mental health conditions diagnosed by medical professionals. Given Nevada's severe shortage of mental health professionals, especially in our rural areas, there can be no doubt our numbers are grossly underreported, meaning the mental health crisis for youth in those areas with little-to-no-access (tribal lands, rural areas) is likely more extreme than the data suggests.

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.

"We urge parents, policymakers, educators and other non-profits to join us during this critical time as we advocate for all Nevada's children," said Dr. Tyler-Garner. "The pandemic strained many institutions and families to the breaking point. While all the effects of the past several years are yet to be felt, we know with certainty that helping our children find the tools to deal with this unprecedented global event will be key to unlocking their (and our) future as a state."

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 Children’s Advocacy Alliance

The Children’s Advocacy Alliance (CAA) is a community-based nonprofit organization that mobilizes people, resources and reason to ensure every child has a chance to thrive and to make Nevada a better place to live and raise a family. CAA advocates for the well-being of Nevada’s Children and brings people together to build consensus around priorities and to leverage our collective strength toward real changes in policy and practice. For more information, visit www.caanv.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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