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Pennsylvania Ranks 21st in Nation for Child Well-Being

Data across 50 states show 7.3 million kids with anxiety or depression, as effects of coronavirus crisis linger, Annie E. Casey Foundation finds

HARRISBURG — Pennsylvania ranks 21st for child 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 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. 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."

The report sheds light on the health, economic and other challenges affecting American children and how those challenges are more likely to affect children of color.

The state ranks 24th for the number of uninsured children. Kari King, president and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, said the pandemic has brought no shortage of challenges, and thanks to a federal disenrollment freeze, the uninterrupted access children have to health coverage through Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) has helped them weather the storm. According to the state Department of Human Services, nearly 45% of children in Pennsylvania have access to affordable, quality health care coverage through the two programs.

"Medicaid and CHIP coverage ensures children get regular checkups that include mental health and social-emotional development screenings," King said. "During the pandemic, we've seen a record number of children enrolled in Medicaid, and one of our goals is to ensure they stay covered when the federal public health emergency ends."

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.

The percentage of children with depression or anxiety in Pennsylvania jumped by an even larger amount than it did nationally. It increased by 28%, from 10.2% (226,000) to 13% (282,000) of children ages 3-17.

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 before the most recent federal survey. In Pennsylvania, one out of every 12 high schoolers attempted suicide — students of color need more supports, as the survey shows that one in eight Black students and more than one in seven Hispanic students attempted suicide.

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.

“When the public health emergency ends, 346,000 children are at risk of losing foundational health care coverage as the state begins to roll back from the continuous coverage requirement,” said King. “The state can support child mental health by ensuring it is thoughtful and proactive in its approach when it begins to redetermine eligibility for all children enrolled in Medicaid and CHIP.”

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 Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children

Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children is a strong, effective and trusted voice to improve the health, education and well-being of children and youth in the commonwealth. Since 1992 its public policy victories have helped countless children learn, thrive, and succeed, regardless of circumstances. PPC is statewide, independent, non-partisan, and non-profit. Learn more at papartnerships.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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