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Report shows worsening mental health among children in Vermont

Vermont ranks 5th in child well-being but young Vermonters facing unprecedented mental health impacts despite state's top ranking .

Montpelier — Vermont ranks 5th in 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 Vermont and across America are in the midst of a mental health crisis, struggling with anxiety and depression at unprecedented levels. This year's annual 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 presents data indicating that in Vermont between 2016 and 2020, the number of 3-17 year olds experiencing depression or anxiety had already increased by 40%, from 13.7% to 19.2%. "These data are not even reflective of the acute and ongoing impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. We know that this was a pre-existing trend that has worsened in the last two years," said Sarah Teel, research director at Voices for Vermont's Children, an independent non-profit child advocacy organization.

According to Vermont's most recent Youth Risk Behavior Survey report, compiled with data collected in 2019, 31% of 9th-12th graders and 23% of 6th-8th graders reported feeling sad or hopeless almost every day for at least two weeks in a row in the previous year. For LGBTQ students, the high school rate was 63% and the middle school rate was 58%. Students of color also had a higher rate: 34% in high school and 30% in middle school.

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.

In addition to the 5th place overall ranking, the report places Vermont:

- 12th in the Economic well-being domain
- 5th in Education
- 3rd in Health
- 3rd in Family and Community

Some additional notable data points are:

- In the economic well-being domain, Vermont ranks 23rd for households experiencing a high housing cost burden, with an estimated 31,000 kids (26%) in households where 30% or more of the household income is spent on housing costs. An estimated 30,000 kids (26%) of kids are also living in households where no parent has full-time, year-round employment (the national rate is 27%). These two economic security indicators are responsible for the 12th place ranking in that domain, as the state ranks 4th for the number of children in poverty (12% in 2016-2020; about 14,000 kids) and also ranks 4th for the number of young people ages 16-19 who are disconnected from both school and work (2,000 young adults).
- Vermont ranks 2nd (after Massachusetts) for the number of children lacking health insurance – an estimated 2,000 kids. Enrolling just over 800 additional children in health insurance would move Vermont to the top spot for this indicator.
- Between 2016-2020, 43% of 3- and 4-year-old children were not enrolled in preschool in Vermont; the national rate during the same time period was 53%.

“Mental health is just as important as physical health in a child’s ability to thrive,” said Lisa Hamilton, president and CEO of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. “As our nation continues to navigate the fallout from the COVID crisis, policymakers must do more to ensure all kids have access to the care and support they need to cope and live full lives.” Voices for Vermont’s Children joins The Annie E. Casey Foundation in urging 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.

In addition, Voices recommends several policies within reach at the state level:

- To address basic needs, Vermont’s TANF program, Reach Up, should be adequately funded, bringing the benefit in line with families’ basic needs and including adequate support for housing costs.
- Communities should be encouraged to use Vermont’s existing [Community Schools framework](#) to develop responsive schools that meet the needs of children and their families in an equitable way through authentic family engagement and youth input.
- Fund and support existing equity initiatives and policies established by state government to ensure robust implementation and impact.

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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 Vermont’s Children

Voices for Vermont’s Children is a research-based, multi-issue advocacy organization focused on promoting public policies that center a systemic response to meeting the needs of children and youth. We apply research, analysis and the lived experience of Vermont’s children and families to the pursuit of equity for all kids. To learn more, visit www.voicesforvtkids.org.

ABOUT THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

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