



**CHILDREN'S ALLIANCE**

*A Voice for Washington's Children, Youth & Families*

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

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### **KIDS' MENTAL HEALTH IS WORSE IN WASHINGTON**

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

**SEATTLE** — Washington's children are grappling with mental health challenges in even greater numbers than in other communities across the country, 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.

For the first time, this 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 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.

Here in Washington, 15.1% of children are struggling with anxiety or depression compared to 11.8% nationally. The number of Washington children and teens with either condition rose by 33.6% from 2016 to 2020, even more than the national increase.

"Washington's kids were facing plenty of issues before the COVID-19 pandemic," said Dr. Stephan Blanford, executive director of Children's Alliance, Washington state's member of the KIDS COUNT network. "More than two years later, a mental health pandemic is making the barriers of poverty and racism all the more formidable."

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 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.

Here in Washington, the state legislature took some positive steps toward addressing child and youth mental health in the 2022 legislative session. Among their actions:

- Community behavioral health agencies are seeing a 7% Medicaid rate increase on Jan. 1, 2023;
- Health clinics seeking to identify and treat mental health issues for children and youth can access \$2 million in start-up funds;
- The state is offering grants to school-based health centers to expand their behavioral health services;
- Shelter providers can access a \$600,000 fund to pay for coordinated mental health services to youth experiencing homelessness.

The 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.

For immediate help, children, teens and people of any age may call or text 988 to reach the Suicide and Mental Health Crisis Hotline and speak with trained crisis counselors at any time of day or night, 365 days a year.

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#### **RELEASE INFORMATION**

The 2022 *KIDS COUNT® Data Book* will be available at [www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org). Additional information is available at [www.aecf.org/databook](http://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 Alliance**

Children's Alliance is Washington's statewide, nonpartisan child advocacy organization, partnering with more than 6,000 individuals and 150 organizations to advocate for policies that improve the lives of kids in Washington and advance racial equity. For more information, visit [www.childrensalliance.org](http://www.childrensalliance.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](http://www.aecf.org). KIDS COUNT® is a registered trademark of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

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