



West Virginia KIDS COUNT

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

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West Virginia Ranks 42nd in Child Well-Being as Depression and Anxiety Surges 25% in Children Suffering from the Mental Health Pandemic

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

Charleston, W. Va. — West Virginia ranks 42nd in child well-being, a repeat standing from last year 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. The annual report focuses this year 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.

“Prior to the pandemic, children were already experiencing more mental health concerns. Researchers expect the post-pandemic mental health crisis to cause these numbers to rise even more, ” said Tricia Kingery, Executive Director of West Virginia KIDS COUNT. “We cannot underestimate the profound impact this global crisis has had on our children. The mental health fallout or ‘echo pandemic’ continues to take shape in the form of depression, anxiety, school absenteeism, acting out, academic decline, and much more,” said Kingery. In 2016, the percentage of West Virginia children (3 to 17 years old) struggling with depression or anxiety was 11.7%. In 2020, that number jumped to 14.6%. That’s a 24.8% increase in children needing mental health care and resources.

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. Nine percent 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.

Kingery said that it makes sense to focus a large portion of our childhood mental health efforts on schools because that’s where children spend most of their days. A school that works on its mental health climate and encourages both student connectedness and teacher well-being creates an environment that fosters a child’s academic success, as well as future success in life.

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 WEST VIRGINIA KIDS COUNT

We are now in our 33rd year of championing our vision to make West Virginia a great place to be a kid! Our mission serves us well: Providing the most trusted data about the well-being of West Virginia's children and building alliances to advocate for what our kids need. So many incredible West Virginians believe in and support that mission.

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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