



Contact: Bill Valladares

william@gafcp.org
404-739-0043

UNDER EMBARGO Until June 14, 2023 at 12:01 a.m. ET

Georgia Climbs to 37th in the Nation for Child Well-Being Families Continue to Struggle with Health and Economic Challenges

Georgia maintained and made gains in education outcomes while other states slipped. Child poverty, low birthweight, and access to child care are still concerns for the Peach State.

ATLANTA— Georgia’s national ranking in child and family well-being improved to 37th in the nation after four consecutive years at 38th, according to the 2023 *KIDS COUNT® Data Book*, released today by The Annie E. Casey Foundation. However, Georgia’s low birth-weight rate jumped significantly after leveling off in recent years, child poverty remains high, and low wages for child care workers plague the industry that allows other Georgians to participate in the workforce.

The report reveals that parents in Georgia are less burdened by child care costs than those in other states. Married couples pay, on average, 8% of their median income for center-based child care for a toddler, while single mothers pay 26%. Georgia’s state lottery-funded Pre-kindergarten, aimed at preparing 4-year-olds for success in kindergarten and beyond also is helpful to families. Even with those advantages, 7% of Georgia’s parents with children ages birth to 5 had a family member who had to quit, change, or refuse a job because of problems with child care from 2020 to 2021—compared to 13% nationally.

And while consumers of child care fare better in Georgia than in other states, Georgia’s child care workers are among the lowest paid in the nation, earning a median wage of \$11.71 per hour in 2022—\$2 less than the national average.

Nationwide, those entrusted with the education and care of our youngest residents earn lower wages than 98% of professions. The annual pay for child care workers in 2021 was \$27,490, or \$13.22 an hour—less than the wages for retail workers at \$14.03 and customer service workers at \$17.75. Those are troubling statistics for an industry that a decade ago employed as many Georgians as other large industries, according to a 2016 study titled, [*Economic Impact of the Early Care and Education Industry in Georgia*](#).

“The pandemic has shown us more clearly than ever that high-quality child care and early education plays an integral role in our state’s economic development and workforce,” said Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) Commissioner Amy Jacobs. “Child care workers, or early education teachers, are the most vital part of any classroom. We recognized and rewarded these essential teachers by allocating more than \$100 million in one-time bonuses for them. Our next step is to reduce barriers and provide financial assistance to help early education teachers obtain a professional credential or degree and remain in the early education classroom.”

Georgia ranks 37th in the Nation for Child Well-Being (cont.)

The *KIDS COUNT*[®] *Data Book* uses 16 indicators to rank each state across four domains—health, education, economic well-being, and family and community—to assess child well-being.

Health

Georgia ranks lowest in health at 43rd. This state has suffered a higher-than-average—and rising—low birth-weight rate since 2010, peaking in 2018 at 10.1%. The increase appeared to level off in recent years at 10% in 2019 and 9.9% in 2020. However, Georgia’s low-birthweight rate rose to 10.6% in 2021. LBW, the single strongest predictor of infant mortality, also paints a larger picture about the overall health and access to care for women.

“Difficulty in accessing health care and failing to meet basic needs cause anxiety that produce increased amounts of stress hormones—the immediate cause of having a low-birthweight baby,” said James O’Neal, M.D., a clinical professor at the University of Georgia’s Institute for Disaster Management and past commissioner for the Georgia Department of Public Health. “Pregnant women with high levels of stress hormones during the pandemic were vulnerable to giving birth to low-birthweight infants. The discrimination women of color often feel significantly magnifies the production of stress hormones and explains their higher rate of giving birth to low-birthweight babies compared to white women—which was true pre-pandemic.”

O’Neal said we can expect a reduction in pandemic-related stress and a lower low-birthweight rate as the pandemic continues to morph into an endemic phenomenon. “But we should not settle for pre-pandemic rates of low-birthweight babies being born in this state, and we must continue to drive down that rate in Georgia,” said O’Neal. This can be achieved by:

- improving the overall economic, physical, and emotional well-being of the population;
- reducing systemic and individual racial discrimination; and
- increasing the high school graduation rate, number of good paying jobs, and access to high-quality health care.

Most concerning in the health domain, is that the child and teen death rate continues to increase, jumping by 24% from 2019 to 2021.

While there are troubling health trends for Georgia, the *Data Book* does report some good news. There are 21,000 fewer children without health insurance since 2019, and the rate of Georgia’s teens who are overweight or obese held steady from 2019-2000 to 2000-2021 at 34%. This bucked a national trend of rising obesity rates, improving Georgia’s rank from 36th to 29th in the nation.

Economic Well-Being

While the rate of Georgia’s children who live in households where no parent has full-time, year-round employment hovers around the national average of 29%, the ratio of children living in poverty is higher—20% in Georgia compared to 17% nationwide. The report also reveals more than 40,000 of Georgia’s children were living in poverty in 2021 than in 2019. Beyond that, the number of children who live in households spending more than 30% of their income on housing increased by 30,000 from 2019 to 2021, indicating a need for greater access to affordable housing.

Family and Community Factors

The percentage of children living in single-parent families remains high in Georgia at 38%, compared to the rest of the nation at 34%, ranking the state 42nd in this indicator.

Georgia ranks 37th in the Nation for Child Well-Being (cont.)

The rate of children in families where the head of household lacks a high school diploma matched the national average of 11% in 2021, an improvement for the state, which reported 13% of children falling short in this measure of family stability in 2019. Georgia also saw a decline in its teen birth rate—with 17 births per 1,000 females ages 15 to 19 in 2021, compared with 20 per 1,000 in 2019. The rate of children living in high-poverty census tracts also dropped from 16% in 2012-2016 to 9% in 2017-2021.

Education

Georgia's highest national ranking is in education at 31st. Georgia has remained steady in measures of educational success in recent years and has outpaced some national trends.

The rate of Georgia's fourth graders scoring below proficient in reading remained high at 68% from 2019 until 2022, but a drastic improvement in the state's national ranking from 36th to 21st over that same timeframe indicates Georgia was able to hold steady while other states lost ground.

The rate of Georgia's eighth graders who scored below proficient in math rose significantly from 69% in 2019 to 76% in 2022, which reflects a national trend where 67% of eighth graders scored below proficient in 2019, compared with 74% in 2022. Georgia's ranking in this indicator improved from 29th in 2019 to 28th in 2022, despite the setback.

The report shows a steady improvement in the percentage of Georgia's high school students not graduating on time, with 16% not meeting this milestone in 2019-2020, an improvement from 18% in 2018-2019—and a significant drop from 33% in 2010-2011, the first year the indicator was tracked this way.

“Georgia is making significant strides to improve conditions for our most vulnerable children and families because leaders from both the public and private sectors recognize that our state can prosper only when our communities thrive,” said Georgia Family Connection Partnership Executive Director Gaye Smith. “The pandemic exposed pre-existing issues like housing and food insecurity, physical and mental health care access, and inequities in our education system. Decisionmakers must continue to devise and invest in strategies that will allow people to get the support and care they need—immediately and long term.”

###

Release Information

The *2023 KIDS COUNT® Data Book* is available at aecf.org. Additional information is available at 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 datacenter.aecf.org.

Journalists interested in creating maps, graphs, and rankings in stories about the *Data Book* can use the KIDS COUNT® Data Center at datacenter.kidscount.org.

Georgia Family Connection Partnership (GaFCP) is a public-private partnership created by the State of Georgia and investors from the private sector to assist communities in addressing the serious challenges facing children and families. GaFCP also serves as a resource to state agencies across Georgia that work to improve the conditions of children and families. Georgia KIDS COUNT provides policymakers and citizens with current data they need to make informed decisions regarding priorities, services, and resources that impact Georgia's children, youth, families, and communities. Georgia KIDS COUNT is funded, in part, through a grant from The Annie E. Casey Foundation, a private charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States. Visit gafcp.org.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation creates a brighter future for the nation's children by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling

Georgia ranks 37th in the Nation for Child Well-Being (cont.)

communities into safer and healthier places to live, work, and grow. Visit aecf.org. KIDS COUNT® is a registered trademark of The Annie E. Casey Foundation.