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California Ranks in Bottom Third of All States for Kids' Well-Being
Proposed Budget Cuts Could Worsen State's Ranking

OAKLAND, CA — California ranks 35th among all states in child well-being, according to the **2024 KIDS COUNT® Data Book**, a 50-state report of recent data developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. It's the same place California ranked the year prior.

"California ranking near the bottom in child well-being needs to be a loud wake-up call to our state leaders, especially given that we rank high nationally in other policy areas," said Ted Lempert, president of Children Now, California's member of the KIDS COUNT network. "This report highlights why the Legislature must reject the Administration's proposed draconian cuts to kids in the upcoming state budget."

California's performance in students' education, particularly in math and reading, continues to be at an abysmal level. 77% of 8th graders scored below proficient in math, the same percentage as in 2009, and over two-thirds of 4th graders scored below proficient in reading. That put California 35th overall in Education, down two spots from last year. This can largely be attributed to the state's consistent lack of funding put towards kids' education - California ranks 43rd in percent of GDP spent on TK-12 schools.

With over 1.2 million kids across California living in poverty, the state also ranked dismally in both Economic Well-Being (43rd) and Family and Community (37th). California's child poverty rate is also on track to increase, due to many effective pandemic-era federal supports slated to end with no replacements currently in place. And with data showing kids who grow up in poverty being more likely to live in poverty as adults, the state's poverty issues are set to only get worse.

One bright spot in the data was California ranking 3rd-best in the percentage of children without health insurance. A recent factor in attaining that strong ranking was the state eliminating Medi-Cal premiums for kids and allowing millions more families access to health care, a policy decision fought for and won by Children Now.

"While we lead the country in some areas, we are failing our kids and threatening our collective future," said Lempert. "It's why the last place the Governor and Legislature should look to cut is our kids."

In its 35th year of publication, the **KIDS COUNT® Data Book** focuses on students' lack of basic reading and math skills, a problem decades in the making but brought to light by the focus on learning loss during the COVID-19 pandemic. Unprecedented drops in learning from 2019 to 2022 amounted to decades of lost progress. Chronic absence has soared, with children living in poverty especially unable to resume their school day routines on a regular basis.

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 Casey Foundation report contends that the pandemic is not the sole cause of lower test scores: Educators, researchers, policymakers and employers who track students' academic readiness have been

ringing alarm bells for a long time. U.S. scores in reading and math have barely budged in decades. Compared to peer nations, the United States is not equipping its children with the high-level reading, math and problem-solving skills needed for many of today's fastest-growing occupations in a highly competitive global economy.

This lack of readiness will result in major harm to the nation's economy and to our youth as they join the workforce. [Up to \\$31 trillion](#) in U.S. economic activity hinges on helping young people overcome learning loss caused by the pandemic. Students who don't advance beyond lower levels of math are more likely to be [unemployed after high school](#). One analysis calculates the drop in math scores between 2019 and 2022 will [reduce lifetime earnings](#) by 1.6% for 48 million pandemic-era students, for a total of \$900 billion in lost income.

The Foundation recommends the following:

- To get kids back on track, we must make sure they arrive at the classroom ready to learn by **ensuring access to low- or no-cost meals, a reliable internet connection, a place to study and time with friends, teachers and counselors.**
- **Expand access to intensive tutoring** for students who are behind in their classes and missing academic milestones. Research has shown the [most effective tutoring](#) is in person, high dosage and tied directly to the school.
- **States should take advantage of all their allocated pandemic relief funding to prioritize the social, emotional, academic and physical well-being of students.** As long as funds are obligated by the Sept. 30 deadline, states should have [two more full years to spend them](#).
- **States and school systems should address chronic absence, so more students return to learn.** While few states gather and report chronic absence data by grade, [all of them should](#). Improving attendance tracking and data will inform future decision-making. Lawmakers should embrace [positive approaches](#) rather than criminalizing students or parents due to attendance challenges, because they may not understand the consequences of even a few days missed.
- **Policymakers should invest in community schools**, public schools that provide wraparound support to kids and families. Natural homes for tutoring, mental health support, nutritional aid and other services, community schools use innovative and creative programs to [support young learners](#) and encourage parent engagement, which leads to [better outcomes for kids](#).

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RELEASE INFORMATION

The 2024 *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 datacenter.aecf.org.

ABOUT CHILDREN NOW

By employing a game-changing, whole-child (pre-natal to age 26), antiracist, connector model, [Children Now](#) harnesses collective power to achieve transformational and systemic results for California's kids, so that all children have the services and supports they need to reach their full potential. Children Now also coordinates [The Children's Movement of California](#), the most diverse advocacy network in the country, with over 5,400 organizations across the state that care about kids and help drive policy changes through collective action campaigns.

ABOUT THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

The Annie E. Casey Foundation creates a brighter future for the nation's young people 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.