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Contact:

Mara Powell

mpowell@kyyouth.org

502-895-8167 X122

Kentucky Ranks 36th in 2026 KIDS COUNT Data Book as Kentucky Youth Advocates Urges Deepened Focus on How Kids and Families Fare

Annual National Report on Child Well-Being Shows Progress and Gaps for Kentucky

LOUISVILLE, KY – Kentucky ranks 36th in child well-being, according to the **2026 KIDS COUNT Data Book**, a 50-state report of recent data developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation analyzing how kids are faring nationwide. While progress was made on eight of the 16 indicators over a five-year period in Kentucky, the data shows sustained challenges driven by factors such as a crisis in educational outcomes, an increase in child deaths, a drop in health insurance coverage after pandemic-era enhancements ended, and a high housing cost burden among families.

“Behind every number in this report is a Kentucky kid who is either hungry or fed, housed or homeless, progressing academically or falling behind. The annual *Data Book* provides a crucial reality check on how children are faring and challenges elected officials, advocates, and other caring Kentuckians to focus in on where policy change or investment really is needed,” said Dr. Shannon Moody, the incoming executive director of Kentucky Youth Advocates, Kentucky’s member of the Casey Foundation’s KIDS COUNT network

For the first time, states receive a comprehensive score (from 0 to 1,000) in the *Data Book*, not just a ranking. The scores track the 16 indicators in four domains – economic well-being, education, health, and family and community factors – from 2019 to 2024. The new scoring system shows whether public policies and investments are actually improving children’s lives, not merely how states compare to each other. Kentucky received a score of 498, below the national score of 547 and yet improved from 465 in 2019, with the greatest improvements in the family and community domain.

Statewide data trends between 2019 and 2024 find:

- While the percent of children in poverty has decreased by 14% in this timeframe, Kentucky ranks in the bottom 10 relative to other states and nearly one in five (19%) children live in families with an income below the federal poverty line.

- Ranking 11th in the nation, the percent of children in households burdened by high housing costs remained stagnant at 23% despite ongoing efforts by advocates and policymakers to improve housing affordability and access across the Commonwealth.
- Education is Kentucky's strongest domain in comparison to other states, ranking second in the rate of high school student graduation and 10th in fourth grade reading proficiency. Yet, two-thirds of fourth graders scored below proficient reading levels and over three in four eighth graders scored below proficient math scores in 2024 – both worse than scores in 2019.
- The child and teen death rate remains an area of concern as the rate increased from 29 deaths per 100,000 children in 2019 to 31 deaths per 100,000 children, with state data citing growing trends in deaths by accidental ingestions or overdose and by suicide as the result of a firearm. The Commonwealth now ranks 30th in the nation for this indicator.
- Kentucky has had a consistent rate of 96% or more of children with health insurance since 2015, with a slight increase to 97% in 2023 due to ongoing pandemic-era healthcare policies. Then in 2024, the Commonwealth saw a 25% jump in children without health coverage compared to 2019 bringing the coverage rate to 95%.
- The percent of children and teens ages 10 to 17 who are overweight or obese decreased from 37% in 2018-2019 to 33% in 2023-2024 – a promising improvement, though Kentucky ranks among the bottom 10 states in this indicator. Explore more about childhood obesity in the latest [Kentucky KIDS COUNT Data Dashboard](#).
- While still ranking among the worst five states in the nation, the teen birth rate in Kentucky decreased by 20% from 2019 to 2024 – mirroring the decrease nationwide.

“Kids don’t grow up in siloed systems – they are impacted by the homes they live in, the schools they learn at, the foods they consume, the relationships they build within their communities, and the leaders who represent them in Frankfort and D.C.” said Dr. Terry Brooks, retiring executive director of Kentucky Youth Advocates. “There is no data point more illustrative of the integrated nature of being a kid than economic well-being. Childhood poverty carries a demonstrable impact on every facet of a kid's life from academic achievement to family stability, from health outcomes to child safety. Unless and until we begin to address solutions for the nearly 200,000 Kentucky young people waking up every day in dire straits, then we are simply passing the buck. Proven and bipartisan solutions are achievable as early as the 2027 legislative session – and acting on those ideas can bring us ever closer to that day when Kentucky is the best place in America to be young.”

In its 37th year of publication, the *KIDS COUNT® Data Book* provides reliable statewide numbers to help leaders see where progress is being made, where greater support is needed, and which strategies are making a difference. By offering a localized road map, the *Data Book*

equips policymakers, advocates, and communities with the information they need to make decisions that help kids and young people thrive.

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RELEASE INFORMATION

The *2026 KIDS COUNT Data Book* will be 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 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.

ABOUT KENTUCKY YOUTH ADVOCATES

Kentucky Youth Advocates believes all children deserve to be safe, healthy, and secure. As THE independent voice for Kentucky's children, we work to ensure policymakers create investments and policies that are good for children. Learn more at kyyouth.org.