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North Dakota Drops in Child Well-Being Measurement, with Increase in Children Living in Poverty and Progress Needed for Education Outcomes

North Dakota's rank for children's well-being, according to the **2026 KIDS COUNT® Data Book**, dropped to 14th in the nation, from previous year ranking of 7th, with room for improvement in areas like education, housing, and economic well-being.

The most recent year of data showed a significant and alarming jump in poverty, with 23,000 children living below poverty in North Dakota in 2024. From 2019 to 2024, North Dakota saw a 30 percent increase in the rate of children living in poverty. Black and Indigenous children experience poverty rates more than double the overall rate for all North Dakota children. These present-day disparities in poverty are a result of generations of discrimination and lack of investments in Indigenous and communities of color that have made it harder for Black, Indigenous and other families of color to build economic security.

In 2024, 37,000 (or one in five) children in North Dakota live in a household spending more than 30 percent of their income on housing costs. While North Dakota continues to rank toward the top on this indicator, with the smaller share of children affected, the state has seen a 31 percent increase from 2019 to 2024, with more families struggling to afford basic necessities, like housing, food, child care, and transportation.

"The *Data Book* presents an alarming increase in the children who are experiencing poverty and those living in households struggling to afford housing," said Xanna Burg, Director of KIDS COUNT with North Dakota KIDS COUNT. "North Dakota can continue to look at key investments to support families struggling to afford basic necessities and to help ensure our children are set up for success into the future."

In North Dakota, education outcomes are trending in the wrong direction with this most recent round of data. Only 29 percent of fourth grade students were proficient or above in reading in 2024, a slide from 31 percent in 2022 and placing the state 32nd in this category. The **2026 KIDS COUNT® Data Book** also shows North Dakota ranking 50th in preschool enrollment, with 71 percent of children ages 3 and 4 not in school from 2020-2024. North Dakota's continued state investments in early childhood through broader support for Child Care Assistance and the Best in Class four-year-old program have significantly changed the early childhood landscape during the timeframe this data represents. Continued investment in these two early childhood programs is one way the state can increase access to early education opportunities.

For the first time this year, states receive a comprehensive score (from 0 to 1,000) in the Data Book, not just a ranking. The scores track 16 indicators in four domains – economic well-being, education, health, and family and community factors – over a five-year period from 2019 to 2024. The new scoring system shows whether policies and public investments are improving children’s lives, not merely how states compare to each other. North Dakota received a score of 636, above the national score of 547; however, North Dakota’s overall score has dropped 62 points since 2019.

Additional highlights from the report findings for North Dakota include:

- **Education:** High school graduation rates declined slightly again this past year, with 82 percent of high school students graduating in four years. The percent of North Dakota high school students not graduating on time has increased 50 percent over the past five years.
- **Health:** In 2024, 7 percent of children were estimated to lack health insurance in North Dakota, an increase from the year prior. The health insurance landscape has continued to shift dramatically throughout 2023 and into today likely leading to this upward shift. North Dakota can improve outreach to ensure children eligible for Medicaid are enrolled.

North Dakota should continue to invest in children and families to ensure all children have what they need to thrive. **Passing a state child tax credit**, particularly one that is refundable for low-income families, can help those struggling the most to pay for rising costs of housing, food, child care, and other necessities. Additionally, it is a critical moment to ensure federal funding is not cut for key programs that support families, like Head Start, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP, Medicaid, and many others.

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RELEASE INFORMATION

The 2026 KIDS COUNT Data Book will be available at www.aecf.org/databook. 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 NORTH DAKOTA KIDS COUNT

North Dakota KIDS COUNT is a leading resource for data on child and family well-being in the state and is dedicated to providing current, relevant, and reliable data to shape the issues affecting North Dakota children and families. More information can be found at ndkidscount.org. North Dakota KIDS COUNT is a project of the Montana Budget & Policy Center, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization providing in-depth research and analysis on budget, tax, and economic issues. The Montana Budget & Policy Center also leads the KIDS COUNT work in Montana and South Dakota. More information can be found at www.montanabudget.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.