



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

August 8th, 2022

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Chronic Absenteeism Skyrocketed 45% in Ohio, Pointing to Unmet Health and Basic Needs of Children and Families
Ohio ranked 31st for children's well-being in new 50-state report that sounds the alarm of a mental health crisis
among children and adolescents in the United States

COLUMBUS — Chronic absenteeism — a leading indicator of unmet basic needs among children — skyrocketed by 45% in Ohio schools between 2019 and 2021, an alarming figure demonstrating widespread unmet needs among many Ohio families and a growing child and youth mental health crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought families to their breaking point, according to the new [2022 KIDS COUNT® Data Book](#) released today by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The *Data Book* underscores the mental, emotional, physical and financial fatigue of Ohio's children, youth and families, especially in Black, Latino, and other communities of color, and urges immediate and sustained prioritization of resources towards a healthy, equitable recovery for all Ohioans.

The *Data Book* shows the impact of the pandemic, where more than 1 in 9 children across the nation experiencing anxiety, depression or both, prompting the U.S. surgeon general to describe a youth "mental health pandemic." In partnership with the Foundation, [Children's Defense Fund-Ohio \(CDF-Ohio\)](#) also released its [2022 KIDS COUNT® Ohio Data Profiles](#) today, providing further evidence of the ongoing hardships Ohio children are facing with greater localized nuance by county, region and school district.

"Our children represent the future of our nation and must have their needs met — which include their behavioral and mental health needs to thrive and flourish. When children are emotionally and mentally well, they stand a better chance of staying healthy and being ready to learn and contribute to society as they transition into adulthood," says **Tracy Nájera, state director of Children's Defense Fund-Ohio**. "There are still many uncertainties and challenges that lie ahead of us, but one thing is clear we must do our best to ensure they are properly cared for in the midst of this pandemic."

Each year, the *Data Book* presents sixteen indicators measuring four domains — economic well-being, education, health and family and community context — and ranks the states according to how children are faring overall. Ohio has remained middle of the pack for the third consecutive year, sitting 31st in the nation overall and even dropping lower in the ranks for individual domains like economic well-being and health. Here's how Ohio ranks:

- **27th in Economic Well-Being.** Ohio showed improvement with a 29% decrease from 2008-2012 to 2016-2020 for children in households that spend more than 30% of their income on housing and a 14%

decrease of children living in poverty during the same time frame. Among neighboring states, Ohio surpasses Michigan (29th) and is ahead of both West Virginia (47th) and Kentucky (38th).

- **28th in Education.** The 2016-2020 five-year estimates indicate that Ohio ranked 38th out of 50 states for students not graduating from high school in four years. Not only are students struggling to graduate, but younger students are also struggling within the classroom in fourth grade reading and eighth grade math where only 36% and 38% of students respectively were scoring above proficiency in both subjects, although these were fully pre-pandemic figures.
- **32nd in Health.** The share of low birthweight babies decreased, 8.6% to 8.5%, and children without health insurance decreased, 6% to 4%, while the child and teen death rate increased from 25 to 28 per 100,000
- **33rd in Family and Community.** Over a five-year period, from 2016 to 2020, the number of households that lack a high school diploma decreased 10%, and the number of children living in highly concentrated areas of poverty decreased 21%. Since 2010, the teen birth rate decreased by 47%.

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, especially Black and Indigenous students. 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.

“Mental health is just as important as physical health in a child’s ability to thrive,” said Lisa Hamilton, president and CEO of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. “As our nation continues to navigate the fallout from the COVID crisis, policymakers must do more to ensure all kids have access to the care and support they need to cope and live full lives.”

Alongside the national *Data Book*, today, CDF-Ohio also released a partner resource — the [Ohio Data Profiles](#) — to provide a closer look at regional, race and ethnicity, county and school district-level data. Some key data insights include:

- **As a state, children missing 10% or more of instructional time increased from 17% to 24% from 2018-2019 to 2020-2021.** Chronic absenteeism increased in every Ohio region, with districts categorized as metropolitan, or urban areas, experiencing the highest rate at 27.7%.
- **Ohio Data Profiles offer a detailed look at Ohio’s rate of child poverty by race and ethnicity. 40.7% of Black children, 30.7% of Hispanic or Latino children, and 28.3% of children of two or more races faced conditions of poverty.** Median income was only half of the state average for Black or African American households, at \$34,778, and was below \$50,000 for Hispanic or Latino households and those of two or more races.
- **The profiles combine data for each of the 610 school districts in Ohio.** Eighth grade math proficiency ranged from as low as few as 4% of students in some districts to as high as 98% in others and third grade reading proficiency ranged from 10% to 98%, demonstrating striking disparities based on which districts children attend.

- **The profiles show the range of children in foster care per 1,000 in 2020 was highest in Adams County, 44.5 per 1,000, and lowest in Fulton County, 1.2 per 1,000.** Like the year before, Adams County had the highest rate of children living in foster care, 34.5 per 1,000, or 10 more youth within that county were placed in out-of-home care for each 1,000 children. Within the Appalachian region, the rate of children in foster care sat at 11.2 per 1,000 in 2020.

Ensuring an equitable and expansive recovery must be a priority to prevent irreversible harm to the lives of children and families and the well-being of communities. The Annie E. Casey Foundation and Children’s Defense Fund-Ohio calls on lawmakers to build a brighter and more sustainable future for Ohioans and children and families across the nation by:

- **Distribute remaining American Rescue Plan Act dollars within local communities and programs.** Nearly \$1.9 billion of remaining ARPA funding can be used as a resource to meet pandemic response needs and rebuild a stronger, and more equitable economy as the state recovers. School Based Healthcare and continuing school lunch waivers to make sure all children have adequate nutrition during the school day are important steps in investing in child health and wellness within our schools.
- **Prioritize the recovery and equitable distribution of resources for hard-hit Black, Indigenous, Latino and other communities of color.** From the beginning of the pandemic, CDF-Ohio has challenged our public officials to prioritize communities that we anticipated would be hit hardest in this pandemic – in terms of infection rates, prioritizing vaccination access, outreach for child tax credit enrollments, and advocating for waivers to make health insurance, childcare and nutrition program enrollments less burdensome and more accessible. This work is not over and prioritizing investments for recovery and building more resilient communities is critically needed.
- **Relieve the economic burden from the impact of inflation and housing costs with Child Tax Credit outreach using the [“Get CTC” campaign](#).** A unique opportunity is at stake to take advantage of available federal dollars for families with the Child Tax Credit and improve child poverty rates.
- **Meet children’s basic needs.** Youth who grow up in poverty experience significant stressors and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) such as hunger and housing insecurity. 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 behavioral health care that take 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 Children's Defense Fund-Ohio

The Children's Defense Fund Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities.

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 <https://www.aecf.org/>. KIDS COUNT® is a registered trademark of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

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