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Rhode Island Ranks 25th in Child Well-Being, Children Still Suffering from Mental Health Pandemic

Data across 50 states show 7.3 million kids with anxiety or depression as effects of coronavirus crisis linger, Annie E. Casey Foundation finds

Providence — Rhode Island’s children are faring well in health compared to the children in other states, according to the **2022 KIDS COUNT® Data Book**, a 50-state report of recent household data developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation analyzing how children and families are faring. However, children in America are in the midst of a mental health crisis, struggling with anxiety and depression at unprecedented levels. For the first time, this annual resource focuses on youth mental health, concurring with a recent assessment by the U.S. surgeon general that conditions amount to a youth “*mental health pandemic*.”

The report sheds light on the health, economic and other challenges affecting American children as well as how those challenges are more likely to affect children of color.

“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.”

Children and youth have suffered trauma and tremendous loss over the past two and a half years. By July 2022, more than 1 million people in America had died from the novel coronavirus, including more than 1,600 children, and more than 200,000 kids had lost a parent or primary caregiver. And even as they experience COVID-era mental health challenges, many children have contended with conditions that were making life harder well before 2020.

“This year’s *Data Book* underscores the fact that the mental health of far too many children is suffering — and we need to act now,” said Elizabeth Burke Bryant, executive director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. “Children need to be able to access mental health services where and when they need it. Schools are an important access point, and we have work to do to ensure that there are adequate numbers of mental health professionals in schools to meet the need. Children’s mental health treatment must be culturally relevant and designed to promote a child’s healing and emotional security. And as the *Data Book* shows, firearms are now the leading cause of death for children in the United States. Rhode Island has taken important steps to prevent firearm injuries and deaths among children this year and last, but we need to do more.”

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. 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.

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 data in this year's report are a mix of pre-pandemic and more recent figures and are the latest available.

Data from this report show that in Rhode Island, more than one in seven children (14.9%) experienced anxiety and/or depression in 2020, the year the pandemic hit. Children and youth continue to struggle with mental health issues brought on by the pandemic and other stresses, and this report provides recommendations about how states and the nation can do more to support the mental health of children and youth.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation calls for lawmakers to heed the surgeon general's warning and respond by developing programs and policies to ease mental health burdens on children and their families. They urge policymakers to:

- **Prioritize meeting kids' basic needs.** Youth who grow up in poverty are two to three times more likely to develop mental health conditions than their peers. 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.
 - The state's focus on improving access to affordable housing through a \$250 million investment of *American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA)* funds will help address the housing crisis in Rhode Island, but there are still many families struggling to meet their basic needs, and families of color have been hit particularly hard by the pandemic and the resulting economic crisis.
- **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.
 - Children cannot access mental health services easily if they do not have access to health insurance. Rhode Island covers about 98% of its children and took an important step this session to cover all children with a bill that expands RIte Care

coverage to include all children in low-income families regardless of immigration status.

- However, Rhode Island has work to do to ensure that children have access to the mental health care they need where and when they need it, and that is often in their schools, with seamless connections to additional community-based mental health services as needed. We need to increase the number of school-based mental health professionals to meet this need.
- **Bolster mental health care that takes 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.
 - Children need care that is trauma informed. Rhode Island took an important step this year by passing the *Trauma-Informed Schools Act* which establishes the implementation of trauma-informed practices in all elementary and secondary schools and creates a trauma-informed commission.
 - Children’s cultural, sexual and gender identities need to be respected and appropriately addressed in mental health treatment settings, and we need to understand and address the additional risks for mental health problems faced by children living in poverty, children of color and LGBTQ+ children due to trauma, exposure to violence, racism and discrimination based on sexual and gender identity.

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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 datacenter.kidscount.org.

ABOUT RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is a statewide children’s policy organization that works to improve the health, economic well-being, safety, education and development of Rhode Island children with a core focus on equity.

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 www.aecf.org. KIDS COUNT® is a registered trademark of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

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