



THE COVID-19 CRISIS THREATENS INVESTMENTS IN A HEALTHY FUTURE PRE-COVID, RHODE ISLAND RANKED AS ‘WORKING EFFECTIVELY’ FOR BABIES

*COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated existing disparities
among young children and their families*

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Contacts: Max Samis, ZERO TO THREE, (202) 857-2658

Katherine Chu, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, kchu@rikidscount.org

RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT
ONE UNION STATION
PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND 02903
401/351-9400 • 401/351-1758 (FAX)

WASHINGTON, DC – New data released today shows that **before the COVID-19 pandemic**, Rhode Island ranked as a near-top state for babies. The *State of Babies Yearbook: 2020*, released today by early childhood development nonprofit ZERO TO THREE, comes at a critical time in our nation’s response to the ongoing public health crisis and resulting economic fallout. The research compiles nearly 60 indicators that affect the well-being of children ages 0 to 3 and provides an in-depth look at national and state-by-state progress across three policy areas: Good Health, Strong Families, and Positive Early Learning Experiences. The *State of Babies Yearbook: 2020* placed Rhode Island in the Working Effectively (W) tier of states for babies.

New data this year shows significant disparities in opportunity for our youngest children throughout the country. In every state—even Rhode Island—babies of color, babies in families with low-incomes, and in urban or rural areas face inequities that challenge the foundational brain development of the earliest years. The pandemic has further exposed and exacerbated existing disparities and structural barriers, which have harmful and life-altering effects that begin even before birth and can last a lifetime.

Rhode Island has a strong foundation of effective policies to build on, including a state paid family leave program that helps some families stay home with newborns, high vaccination rates, strong prenatal care, and high participation rates in the Early Intervention program. Even so, the *State of Babies Yearbook: 2020* shows that the littlest Rhode Islanders face big challenges, and that the state’s policies and programs can make a difference in their ability to reach their full potential. The *Yearbook* highlights areas where Rhode Island can do better for its babies. The state has significant work to do to improve rates and duration of breastfeeding, improve maternal mental health, reduce child maltreatment, and improve access to high-quality child care.

“Telling the story of Rhode Island’s babies is more important than ever. As the current crises have shown, the status quo for babies and families simply isn’t enough,” said Myra Jones-Taylor, chief policy officer of ZERO TO THREE. “The pandemic and current events in response to policy brutality and racism will have lasting effects on children, their families, the State of Rhode Island, and our nation as we recover and rebuild. As advocates for babies, we must act quickly and boldly to ensure that our leaders prioritize the potential of every baby.”

Rhode Island is home to 32,465 babies. Before the pandemic, as many as more than one in five babies (22 percent) lived in households with incomes below the poverty line and two out of every five babies (42 percent) lived in low-income households with incomes less than twice the federal poverty line (in

2018, about \$50,000 a year for a family of four), placing them at economic disadvantage. America's youngest children are diverse and are raised in a variety of family contexts. In Rhode Island, 45 percent of babies are children of color, and Black, Latino, and Native American babies are more likely to grow up in poverty than White children. A broad array of policies and services are required to ensure all babies have an equitable start in life.

"Babies are Rhode Island's future. We need to ensure that equitable investments in infants, toddlers, and their families are prioritized during this crisis," said Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, a state partner of ZERO TO THREE's *Think Babies*.

As state and federal officials make decisions about budgets and services in 2020 and 2021, it is important to ensure that Rhode Island retains its "Working Effectively" ranking in the *Yearbook* and to double down on strategies to keep babies safe, healthy, and developing on track during the pandemic. "Things have been hard to adjust to for everybody, but perhaps the ones with little children have been hit the hardest. Not only are families worried about keeping their families safe and food on the table, we now had to figure out how to work/study from home while caring for little kids," said Providence mother Fernanda Poyant.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT and The Right from the Start Campaign (rightfromthestartri.org) are focused on advancing critical policies to help families with infants and toddlers:

- Increase funding for the Child Care Assistance Program to enable programs to operate safely during the pandemic and to ensure families have options for child care that promote learning and development.
- Implement strategies to improve the wages of early educators working with children and families during the pandemic and beyond.
- Improve our state's paid family leave program (Temporary Caregivers Insurance) to match national benchmarks by increasing wage replacement rates and extending the number of weeks.
- Cover community-based doula services through Medicaid and private health insurance.
- Sustain our network of voluntary, evidence-based family home visiting programs by allocating state funds as a Medicaid match to fund remote and in-person services that help parents during these critical early years.

Decisions that affect babies and families happen at all levels of government. That is why Rhode Island KIDS COUNT has joined ZERO TO THREE and nearly 70 other national and state organizations to amplify the *Think Babies* message nationally and elevate the importance of the first three years in Rhode Island.

To access the national profile and state data, visit stateofbabies.org.

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About ZERO TO THREE

ZERO TO THREE works to ensure all infants and toddlers benefit from the family and community connections critical to their well-being and development. Since 1977, the organization has advanced the proven power of nurturing relationships by transforming the science of early childhood into helpful resources, practical tools and responsive policies for millions of parents, professionals and policymakers.

For more information, and to learn how to become a ZERO TO THREE member, please visit zerotothree.org, facebook.com/zerotothree, or follow [@ZEROTOTHREE](https://twitter.com/ZEROTOTHREE) on Twitter.

About *Think Babies*™

ZERO TO THREE created *Think Babies* to make the potential of every baby a national priority. When we *Think Babies* and invest in infants, toddlers, and their families, we ensure a strong future for us all. Learn more at thinkbabies.org or follow [@ZEROTOTHREE](https://twitter.com/ZEROTOTHREE) on Twitter.

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. Please visit rikidscount.org and follow [@RIKIDSCOUNT](https://twitter.com/RIKIDSCOUNT) on Twitter.

About Right from the Start

Right from the Start is a legislative and budget campaign to advance state policies for young children and their families in Rhode Island. During the COVID-19 crisis, it has become even more clear that policies and programs that help families with young children are essential for a strong economy and public health. Investments now will help our state and Rhode Island's young children and families weather this crisis and emerge stronger on the other side. Please visit www.rightfromthestartri.org and follow [@RightStartRI](https://twitter.com/RightStartRI) on Twitter.