



**UNDER EMBARGO Until Monday, June 17 at 12:01 a.m. ET**

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## **Washington needs to ensure increasing child population grows up strong**

**30th annual *KIDS COUNT*<sup>®</sup> Data Book reveals policymakers need to prioritize kids' health, early learning, economic security**

**SEATTLE** — Washington state, one of only 15 states where the growth in the child population has outpaced the national average, is now home to 344,000 more children than in 1990, the year the Annie E. Casey Foundation published its first ever *KIDS COUNT*<sup>®</sup> Data Book. While the child population has grown 26 percent in Washington during that time, public efforts to ensure kids' healthy development have not kept pace.

Critical supports like early learning and health care are proven remedies to poverty and other race-based inequities kids face to a strong, shared future. Yet the *2019 KIDS COUNT*<sup>®</sup> Data Book — the most comprehensive annual report on child well-being in the United States — shows that the percentage of children growing up in poverty remains unchanged since 1990. Just 43 percent of Washington 3- and 4-year-olds attend preschool of any kind, and just 8 percent have access to publicly funded, high-quality pre-kindergarten. Pre-K, child care, home visiting and other early services for babies, toddlers and preschool-age children make up just 1 percent of total state spending.

Further, because of an ongoing legacy of racist policies and institutions, serious racial and ethnic disparities persist in economic security, access to health care and other early opportunities for healthy development. In Washington, child poverty is disproportionately experienced by Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian, Black/African American, Latinx and American Indian/Alaska Native children.

State lawmakers have a lot of work to do to ensure all kids in Washington have the chance to thrive.

"We can and must do better," said Paola Maranan, executive director of the Children's Alliance. "Children are one quarter of our state's population but 100 percent of our future. What we do for them today — or fail to do — has long-term implications."

Washington state is growing more diverse, and the child population is at the forefront of this trend. The total number of children in Washington grew from 1.3 million in 1990 to nearly 1.65 million in 2017. During that time, the populations of Black/African American, Asian or Pacific Islander and Latinx children all increased. The population of Latinx children, in particular, grew threefold by 2017 to 21 percent.

Overall, Washington state ranks 21st in economic well-being. One in three Washington children live in households that dedicate more than 30 percent of their income to paying for housing. This figure has increased in the last three decades, from 26 percent in 1990 to 31 percent in 2017. In addition, the total number of children in Washington state living below the federal poverty line has grown by 36 percent since 1990.

Yet the state's approach to WorkFirst/Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) is making it harder for families to get by. Due to sustained, year-over-year budget cuts, WorkFirst/TANF is serving a smaller portion of children in poverty than at any time in the program's history. And families that are being kicked off the program because of its harsh, inflexible time-limit policy are disproportionately Black and American Indian.

"This disproportionate impact to Black and Indigenous kids is shameful and unacceptable," says Michelle Merriweather, president and CEO of the Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle, which connects African American and other families of color with housing, education and workforce development opportunities.

"We need to recognize and act with urgency to make sure public programs are helping build up the next generation — not undercut it before it has a chance to grow."

In measures of child health, the state has made substantial gains in health-insurance coverage for children in recent years — decreasing the share of uninsured kids by more than half since 2010. This is in large part because state lawmakers have bundled Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program into comprehensive, affordable Apple Health for Kids coverage. Ultimately, that has helped the state achieve its ranking of 11th in child health.

Nevertheless, 3 percent of kids remain uninsured. And each year, half of all kids covered by Apple Health are unable to see a dental professional. Black and Mexican American children with incomes above the federal poverty line have [higher rates of untreated tooth decay](#) than white children living below the poverty line.

In early learning, approximately 4 in 10 children in our state ages three and four are attending preschool. While our rates of preschool attendance have grown since 1990, 36 other states have experienced greater increases. Research has shown that investing in high-quality early opportunities like pre-K, quality child care and home visiting can increase the number of kids who are ready for kindergarten, and can reduce racial disparities in readiness for kindergarten.

"We must make the necessary investments in programs that are aimed at ensuring families and kids have the opportunity to get ahead," said Misha Werschkul, executive director of the Washington State Budget & Policy Center. "Lawmakers especially need to take steps to ensure these programs are advancing racial equity and eliminating barriers to opportunity for communities of color."

KIDS COUNT in Washington recommends policymakers take the following steps to ensure our kids are on better track to a healthy, successful life:

- State lawmakers missed an important opportunity this legislative session to make progress toward making sure WorkFirst/TANF is helping more children. During the 2020 session, they must pass legislation to reinvest in this program and roll back harsh time limits and sanctions that have such a negative effect on kids and families — especially Black and American Indian families.
- Washington must continue to work to ensure that no child in the state suffers from preventable health conditions. One promising tool is for state lawmakers to authorize dental therapists to extend care to rural communities, low-income households, communities of color and other populations that lack access to timely, affordable health care.
- Lawmakers need to give more kids high-quality early learning opportunities, like child care and pre-K, to ensure their healthy development.

KIDS COUNT in Washington also applauds some important policy changes that should lead to better rankings in child health and early learning in the coming years. Lawmakers have recently extended health coverage to adults previously excluded from Medicaid, such as Pacific Islander families from the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of Marshall Islands and the Republic of Palau. And they took a step forward for families by passing the Child Care Access Now Act, which works toward affordable care for all families by 2025.

### **Release Information**

The *2019 KIDS COUNT® Data Book* is the 30th edition of an annual data study that is based on U.S. Census and other publicly available data, representing all 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. It will be available June 17 at 12:01 a.m. EDT at [www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org). Additional information is available at [www.aecf.org/databook](http://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](http://datacenter.kidscount.org).

### **About KIDS COUNT in WASHINGTON**

[KIDS COUNT in Washington](http://www.kidscountwa.org) is a partnership of the [Children's Alliance](http://www.childrensalliance.org) and the [Washington State Budget & Policy Center](http://www.washingtonstatebudget.org), pursuing measurable improvements in child outcomes through equitable public policy measures. The two organizations offer policymakers and the public the knowledge they need to remove the barriers kids face to brighter, freer, more equal futures. For more information, visit [www.kidscountwa.org](http://www.kidscountwa.org).

### **About the Annie E. Casey Foundation**

The Annie E. Casey Foundation creates a brighter future for the nation's children 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](http://www.aecf.org).