

# Two unvaccinated babies die of whooping cough in Kentucky; health officials urge recommended immunizations

By MELISSA PATRICK  
*Kentucky Health News*

Two Kentucky infants have died from pertussis, commonly known as whooping cough, within the last six months, according to the Kentucky Department for Public Health. These mark the first pertussis-related deaths in Kentucky since 2018.

Neither the infants nor their mothers had been vaccinated against the disease, prompting health officials to urge all Kentuckians to remain up to date on recommended pertussis immunizations, with an emphasis on the importance of maternal

immunization during pregnancy and for all infants beginning promptly at 2 months of age.

“Anyone can get whooping cough, but infants are at greatest risk for life-threatening illness,” Dr. Steven Stack, DPH commissioner, said in a news release. “Fortunately, when vaccinations are administered to pregnant women, it provides protection to both the mother and the baby.”

Whooping cough is a highly contagious respiratory illness spread by coughing and sneezing. Infected people can spread the disease from the start of symptoms and at least two weeks after coughing begins.

Early symptoms of whooping cough look like a common cold, including runny nose, sneezing, mild cough and low-grade fever. After one to two weeks, long coughing spells develop, which often occur in explosive bursts, sometimes ending with a high-pitched whoop and vomiting. This can go on for up to 10 weeks or more, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Babies younger than one year old are at greatest risk of getting whooping cough and having severe complications from it. Young infants may not initially present with classic symptoms

and may not even have a cough. Instead, they may just struggle to breathe or stop breathing.

It’s also important to know that some people have mild symptoms and don’t know they have whooping cough, but they can still spread the bacteria to others. Many babies are infected by older siblings, parents or caregivers who may not know they have it.

People with pre-existing health conditions that may be worsened by whooping cough are also at high risk for developing a severe infection.

So far in 2025, there already have been 247 cases of whooping cough in Kentucky, according to

the release. In 2024, there were 543 cases, the most since 2012.

“Health officials anticipate that whooping cough will continue to increase during the summer and fall, based on historic trends,” says the release.

The pertussis immunization is combined with the tetanus and diphtheria vaccines (DTaP and Tdap) and is required for Kentucky school children.

Data from the 2024-2025 Kentucky school immunization survey indicate that 86% of kindergarteners and 85% of seventh graders are up to date on their required pertussis immunizations.

Health officials encour-

age everyone to remain up to date with their pertussis vaccines. This includes:

- All pregnant women should be immunized with every pregnancy to protect their babies.
- Infants should be immunized when they are 2 months, 4 months, 6 months and 12 to 15 months old.
- Children should be immunized before starting kindergarten.
- Teens should be immunized when 11 to 12 years old.
- Teens and adults should be immunized at least every 10 years or sooner if an injury occurs, or to protect a newborn.

# US children struggle to catch up educationally while poverty further burdens KY’s kids

*This story discusses suicide. If you or someone you know is contemplating suicide, please call or text the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 988.*

By SARAH LADD  
*The Kentucky Lantern*

Kentucky’s kids are struggling in school more than they did pre-pandemic, according to a new report on child wellbeing from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

While Kentucky children improved in the last few years on a few measures — more have health insurance, for example — every measure of education worsened, according to the KIDS COUNT Book, released Monday.

From 2019-2023, about 63% of Kentucky’s children ages 3 and 4 were not in school, an increase from 58% from 2014-2018.

In 2024, 67% of Kentucky’s fourth graders were less than proficient in reading. That’s up from 65% in 2019.

That same year, most — 76% — of eighth graders in the state weren’t proficient in math, up from 71% in 2019. From 2021-2022, 10% of high school students did not graduate on time, an increase from 9% in 2019, according to the report.

Terry Brooks, the executive director of Kentucky Youth Advocates, told the Lantern that this new data is a “very authentic litmus test for legislators and the governor to put up or shut up when it comes to a commitment to kids.”

“The child poverty level is really ... the canary in

the coal mine. It tells you not just where kids are today, but it tells you where kids are going,” Brooks said.

Kentucky is the 44th worst in the nation for child poverty; one in five Kentucky children live in poverty.

“That flat out means that that is an unacceptable condition — if we care, at all, about kids,” Brooks said.

**What’s in the report?**

Lisa M. Lawson, the president and CEO of The Annie E. Casey Foundation, wrote in the latest national report that “while progress is uneven, the direction is clear.”

“We know what kids need to grow up healthy and connected: stable homes, strong schools, nutritious food, meaningful relationships and opportunities to learn, play and grow,” Lawson wrote. “These are shared needs across communities — and meeting them is a shared responsibility.”

In several ways, Kentucky’s data is similar to the national trends. In both, the education category fared the worst — “consistent with the pandemic’s well-documented toll on student learning and school experiences” — while family and community improved.

**Trends for Kentucky, revealed in the report, include:**

- One in five children live in poverty, ranking them 44th on this measure.
- From 2019-2023, 63% of young children were not in school. That num-

ber was 58% in 2014-2018. Kentucky Youth Advocates says this shows “a continued need for a robust early childhood education infrastructure that prioritizes early learning and care for our youngest learners.”

Last week, Gov. Andy Beshear signed an executive order to establish an advisory committee that will explore support for universal pre-kindergarten programs in Kentucky.

- There is an “unprecedented learning loss following the pandemic and the toll of chronic absenteeism on academic performance” resulting in 67% of fourth graders scoring below proficient in reading and 76% of eighth graders not proficient in math.
- Kentucky has the third highest rate among the states of children who are covered by health insurance; in 2023, 3% of Kentucky children were without coverage.
- The death rate for children and teenagers ages 1-19 increased by 28% in 2023 from 2019.
- There are fewer kids living in homes with a household head who doesn’t have a high school diploma — the number dropped from 11% in 2019 to 9% in 2023.
- There were fewer teen births in 2023, with a rate of 21 per 1,000 ages 15-19. Despite the drop, Kentucky Youth Advocates says, “this remains the Commonwealth’s worst-ranked measure relative to other states at 46th in the nation.”
- In 2023, there were

more Kentucky babies born below optimal weight, which can lead to health problems, than in 2019 — an increase from 8.7% to 8.8%.

“This moment calls for focus, creativity and commitment,” Lawson wrote in the national report. “It calls on leaders at every level to act boldly where improvement is needed and rely on what we know works.”

**‘To blame it on COVID is a cop out.’**

The COVID-19 pandemic, which shuttered school buildings and sent kids home to learn remotely, certainly played a role in delaying youth, Brooks said. But, he added, “to blame it on COVID is a cop-out.”

“I don’t think we can continue to blame a virus for low academic achievement,” he said. “It may have (been) exacerbated under COVID, but it wasn’t created by COVID.”

In the 2017-18 and 2018-19 school years, about 17% of Kentucky children were chronically absent, the Lantern previously reported, meaning they missed more than 10% of their enrolled time at school.

During the 2022-23 school year, nearly 30% of Kentucky’s students were chronically absent. During the 2023-4 year, it was down to 28%.

Meanwhile, the Kentucky General Assembly is too focused on “every hot button social issue there is,” Brooks said. They need to spend more time thinking about deep policy work that can improve education marks,

he said.

“It’s easy to criticize schools, but it takes some imagination to improve schools,” Brooks said.

A retired educator and longtime advocate for children, Brooks said the poor education outcomes Kentucky is seeing now come from multiple factors, including children’s poor mental health and an inadequate teaching workforce. Other items could use lawmaker attention, Brooks said, such as the SEEK formula for funding public schools, “both in terms of adequacy and equity,” and assessment protocols.

These aren’t trendy policies to work on, Brooks acknowledged: “The assessment system is deep policy work. It’s not a way to grab attention.”

“In a lot of ways, forces around education are playing chicken with one another and seeing who blinks first,” Brooks said. “And that’s not the landscape for positive change.”

**Kentucky needs better policies — and ‘common sense’**

There are some immediate policies Brooks would like to see Kentucky lawmakers consider in 2026, which is a budget year. Those include a state earned income tax credit and also a dependent child care tax credit to address childhood poverty.

“The ’26 budget is probably being crafted in the General Assembly right now. I want to see if there’s any dedicated effort to address childhood poverty in this budget, as well as what the governor

presents,” Brooks said. “If there is such an attempt, then kudos go to whoever is proposing that. If not, frankly, Frankfort leaders just need to be quiet about childhood poverty because they don’t really care.”

The pandemic hit kids hard, leading to high rates of depression and anxiety in those separated from peers and support networks. In addition, as the Lantern has reported, access to guns and medications kill kids.

“What we see is an alarming rise in children dying either because of access to medication — and I’m not talking illicit drugs, I’m talking (about) what they get out of the medicine cabinet in their parents’ bathroom — and also unsafe storage of guns,” Brooks said.

A variety of medications — including over the counter pain relievers like Tylenol — can hurt kids if not taken according to directions. Experts recommend securing all medications where children cannot access them, keeping bullets separate from guns and using gun locks.

“While there’s certainly an abundance of responsibility that (goes) to lawmakers and the governor, there’s also an abundance of responsibility to go to moms and dads and grandmas and grandpas,” Brooks said. “Be diligent. Use common sense when it comes to making sure that little boy or little girl can’t get to your gun and shoot themselves, and they can’t get to your medication and overdose.”

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