

# Child poverty is down in Kentucky, but education and health lag

BY SARAH LADD  
KENTUCKY LANTERN

Fewer Kentucky children were living in poverty in 2024 than 2019, right before the COVID-19 pandemic, but nearly one in five kids still lack the resources they need to thrive.

That's according to the latest Kids Count Data Book, released Monday by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The annual report looks at indicators of wellbeing including education, health, economic success and community and family measures.

The data in the 2026 report primarily compares 2019 and 2024. The foundation gave each state a score between 0 and 1,000. Kentucky received a score of 498, which is worse than the national score of 547 but better than 2019, when it received a 465.

Kentucky is still the 36th state in the nation when it comes to child welfare, making it one of the worst places to be a child.

The commonwealth's neighbors are a mixed bag. Kentucky is doing better by its children than West Virginia and Tennessee but worse than Illinois, Indiana and Ohio.

Shannon Moody, the incoming executive director of Kentucky Youth Advocates, said fewer "kids living in homes that are in poverty is always a great thing for Kentucky."

"What we're continuing to keep an eye on is how families are being impacted now, right now, with affordability of basic needs: Groceries, gas, housing and childcare continue to be something that we'll be watching," she said. "I'm really looking forward to seeing what continues to arise when it comes to that, whether or not we'll see things trend back downward."

The data, though it was just released, is still two years old, and much has changed. In 2025, Congress cut Medicaid spending over 10 years by \$880 billion as part of the sweeping One Big Beautiful Bill Act.

That same budget package made recent foster care youth, among others, no longer exempt from work requirements to receive food benefits for themselves and their families through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Nearly half of the people who receive SNAP assistance in Kentucky are under the age of 18.

"It's 2024 data. We did not begin to see the impacts of the pandemic funding being reduced — We're seeing that now in our biennial budget," Moody said.

"I'm glad to see in 2024 less kids were living in homes in poverty, and we need to continue being vigilant about how we are supporting kids and families ... whether it's safety net programs or ensuring that there is affordability among those basic needs."

## BY THE NUMBERS

Other takeaways in the report include:

- About 67% of fourth grade students in Kentucky were not proficient in reading from 2020-2024. That's worse than the four years

## POLICIES THAT COULD HELP

As Kentucky lawmakers kick off their interim legislative session and look ahead to 2027, there are plenty of opportunities to make the commonwealth



Youth ask questions during Children's Advocacy Day in Frankfort on March 4, 2026.

Kentucky Lantern photo by Sarah Ladd



Photo provided  
**SHANNON MOODY**

prior, when it averaged at 59%.

- About 67% of eight grade students in Kentucky lacked math proficiency in 2024, worse than 2019, when about 65% lacked proficiency. The national average was about 70% in 2024. These proficiency points are "very concerning," Moody said.

- Kentucky's rate of high school students graduating on time improved in the 2023-2024 school year. About 8% of students didn't graduate on time, down from 9%. In this, Kentucky is better than the national average, which was at 13% in '23-'24.

- Childhood poverty has decreased, but is still worse than national averages. In 2024, 19% of children in Kentucky lived in poverty, compared with 15% nationally. That's a decline from 22% in Kentucky and 17% nationally in 2022.

- About 63% of Kentucky children ages 3 and 4 weren't in school between 2020-2024. The four years prior, 2015-2019, that number was at 59%. In both blocks of time, more Kentucky children in this age group were out of school than national averages (52% and 54% respectively).

- Teen births declined in 2024 to about 3,000.

- The number of children without health insurance was at 5% in 2024, worse than 4% in 2019.

- The number of babies born underweight increased to nearly 9% (8.8%) in 2024, slightly worse than 8.7% in 2019.

	UNITED STATES		KENTUCKY		SCORE	RANK
<b>ECONOMIC WELL-BEING</b>					<b>507</b> BETTER	<b>39</b>
<b>Children in poverty</b> US 11,117,000   KY 192,000	17% 2019	15% 2024	↓ BETTER	22% 2019	19% 2024	↓ BETTER
<b>Children whose parents lack secure employment</b> US 18,420,000   KY 287,000	26% 2019	25% 2024	↓ BETTER	31% 2019	28% 2024	↓ BETTER
<b>Children living in households with a high housing cost burden</b> US 22,385,000   KY 232,000	30% 2019	31% 2024	↑ WORSE	23% 2019	23% 2024	STABLE
<b>Teens not in school and not working</b> US 1,218,000   KY 20,000	6% 2019	7% 2024	↑ WORSE	8% 2019	8% 2024	STABLE

Kids Count

This graphic shows how Kentucky children are faring economically.

	UNITED STATES		KENTUCKY		SCORE	RANK
<b>HEALTH</b>					<b>556</b> BETTER	<b>31</b>
<b>Low birth-weight babies</b> US 308,966   KY 4,640	8.3% 2019	8.5% 2024	↑ WORSE	8.7% 2019	8.8% 2024	↑ WORSE
<b>Children without health insurance</b> US 4,648,000   KY 54,000	6% 2019	6% 2024	STABLE	4% 2019	5% 2024	↑ WORSE
<b>Child and teen deaths per 100,000</b> US 21,189   KY 335	25 2019	27 2024	↑ WORSE	29 2019	31 2024	↑ WORSE
<b>Children and teens (ages 10 to 17) who are overweight or obese</b> US N.A.   KY N.A.	31% 2018-19	30% 2023-24	↓ BETTER	37% 2018-19	33% 2023-24	↓ BETTER

Kids Count

This graphic shows health rankings for Kentucky's children.

	UNITED STATES		KENTUCKY		SCORE	RANK
<b>EDUCATION</b>					<b>429</b> WORSE	<b>22</b>
<b>Young children (ages 3 and 4) not in school</b> US 4,277,000   KY 70,000	52% 2015-19	54% 2020-24	↑ WORSE	59% 2015-19	63% 2020-24	↑ WORSE
<b>Fourth graders not proficient in reading</b> US N.A.   KY N.A.	66% 2019	70% 2024	↑ WORSE	65% 2019	67% 2024	↑ WORSE
<b>Eighth graders not proficient in math</b> US N.A.   KY N.A.	67% 2019	73% 2024	↑ WORSE	71% 2019	76% 2024	↑ WORSE
<b>High school students not graduating on time</b> US N.A.   KY N.A.	14% 2018-19	13% 2023-24	↓ BETTER	9% 2018-19	8% 2023-24	↓ BETTER

Kids Count

This graphic shows how Kentucky children are faring in education.

safer for kids, Moody said.

Key among those opportunities: Ensure access to affordable and accessible housing, she said.

"We know that if there is a safe place for kids to lay their head every

night and it's consistent, that has resounding impacts on their ability to focus in school and to regulate their emotions," Moody said. "It's good for both their mental and physical health, as well as their education."

Ensuring access to food for kids is crucial as well, she said.

"I'm hopeful that we won't see any reduction in access to those programs, especially for our littlest kids, whether it be WIC or SNAP or school meals, because

we know that access to food is essential for our overall well-being,"

Moody said. "Especially if they are accessing school meal programs, we want them to be able to continue to do that for their well-being."