

Report: Child poverty improving in Kentucky

Youth Advocates call for continued vigilance for kids

BY SARAH LADD
KENTUCKY LANTERN

Fewer Kentucky children were living in poverty in 2024 than 2019, right before the COVID-19

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.



Shannon Moody

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

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 age 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."

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 prior, when it averaged at 59%.
• About 67% of eighth-grade students lacked math proficiency in 2024, worse than

2019, when about 65% lacked proficiency. The national average was about 70% in 2024.

• 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.

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

• 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%.

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

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

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

Stephen Foster Story opens 67th season this weekend

BY KATELYN NORRIS
PAXTON MEDIA GROUP

This summer marks the 67th season for "The Stephen Foster Story," which is set to open on June 13 with four new actors in the principal roles.

The local longtime theater production "The Stephen Foster Story" has just two weeks of rehearsal before opening night. This year, the drama will celebrate its 67th season at the J. Dan Talbott Amphitheatre and 2026 marks the 200th birthday of Stephen Foster.

Stephen Foster Drama Association Artistic Director Johnny Warren said this year's show is special — not only with the four main roles being occupied by new additions, but also a celebration of the production as a whole.

Warren said in his 27 years with the company he has never seen the roles of Stephen Foster, Jane McDowell, Lieve Pise and Joe Aikins taken on by four new actors at the same time. However, Warren said this opportunity gives the actors the ability to bring something new to the roles.

"What happens when new cast members bring their own interpretation and their own skill set and their own talents to the performance is just so fascinating to watch and to witness how different the exact same material can be," he said. "... That's one of the joys of the fact that we do produce 'The Stephen Foster Story' every single year."

This year, the titular role of Stephen Foster will be played by Zachary Petrie from Florence who is making his Bardstown debut this summer. Petrie is a musical theatre alumnus of the Kentucky Governor's School for the Arts and is a rising senior at Northern Kentucky University.

Jane McDowell will be played by Annie Dauk of



CARMAN GOODMAN JONES/Submitted

Four new faces will take on the main roles for this year's production of "The Stephen Foster Story." Back row from left, Zachary Petrie, John Alloway, Annie Dauk. Front row is Gracia Wright.

Louisville. This is not Dauk's first time being on stage at the J. Dan Talbott Amphitheatre. Dauk previously was a part of the drama association's production of "Mary Poppins" as Jane Banks in 2018.

Gracia Wright from Dalton, Georgia, is Lieve Pise in her first year with the drama. Wright is studying musical theatre at Brenau University and was a 2024 Jimmy Awards finalist.

John Alloway from Troy, Alabama, will play Joe Aikins. The recent Troy University graduate will be making his "Stephen Foster Story" debut this summer.

Director Bronson Norris Murphy said he is thrilled to be returning to direct this season's production. He said besides the musical and social history presented in the show, he is most excited to work with the cast they've assembled for their 67th season.

After only a few short days of working with them, Murphy said he can tell their energy, passion and talents are going to bring the story to life in a beautiful way for their audience.

"It is a thrill to use the same script and the same music to tell Stephen Foster's story in new and vital ways each season," he said. "A lot of that is dependent on or inspired by the actor's impressions of the story, the music and ideas for the text. It's really exciting to watch an actor grab on to these words and make them their own."

"The Stephen Foster Story" will begin its season Saturday and will run every Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday through July 4. Beginning July 7, the show will run every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday until Aug. 8.

For more information about opening night or to purchase tickets visit stephenfoster.com.

Your Trusted Hearing Center for over 30 Years



ELIZABETHTOWN HEARING AID CENTER
BETTER HEARING, BETTER LIFE.

FREE Prescription Hearing Aid Trial

(Includes **FREE** Hearing Test)



Support Our Community!

SHOP LOCAL

NO CO-PAY ON HEARING AIDS for Federal Blue Cross Blue Shield Insurance members!

323 N. Mulberry St., Elizabethtown, KY 42701

270.769.6858

Now Accepting New Patients • Accepting ALL Insurance

www.etownhearingaid.com



BBTEL
BRANDENBURG COMMUNICATIONS

If your Wi-Fi isn't working for you, then it's not improving your life.

The ultimate work-life balance is here.

BBTELBlast Wi-Fi

This is the ultimate Wifi Service.

With Brandenburg Telecom, we take all the complexity and stress out of getting internet and Wi-Fi. Our 1GIG Fiber connection combined with our Whole Home managed Wi-Fi service keeps all your devices connected now matter where you are in the house. We take care of all the hard work while you enjoy a secure and fully supported service. Call your local office today to sign up!

Create profiles and set online schedules

ProtectIQ network security

Prioritize traffic and devices

Create a dedicated WFH Wi-Fi network

BRANDENBURG TELECOM
270-982-4466
2840 Leitchfield Rd. • Elizabethtown, KY 42701