

KENTUCKY NEWS

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 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

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 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.

Kentucky counties hit pause on data centers

BY LIAM NIEMEYER
KENTUCKY LANTERN

Daviess County Judge-Executive Charlie Castlen said he hadn't heard of the term "hyperscale" before. That is until news broke that an enormous data center was being planned at the site of an idled aluminum mill in neighboring Hancock County.

"There's much to learn," Castlen said in a phone interview. "People are very passionate about these, saying they don't need to be in our community."

Passionate opposition to data centers in his county led the local government to enact in late May a moratorium preventing data center construction for the next 12 months. That opposition includes ongoing speculation by residents and a county commissioner over local land deals connected to a company that works on "energy and data center infrastructure" investments.

Daviess County, home to more than 100,000 people and the city of Owensboro, is one of a growing number of cities and counties across Kentucky considering such moratoriums — essentially a temporary ban — or implementing other zoning regulations on data center construction.

Moratoriums have been criticized as anti-business by the data industry as technology companies pour billions of dollars into projects.

Dan Diorio, a vice president of state policy for the industry group Data Center Coalition, in an emailed statement said local data center moratoriums "send a signal that the area is closed for business, both for data centers and for other significant economic development projects."

The local moratorium trend follows an outcry by Kentuckians in some communities where there's speculation, or an active proposal, of a large data center moving into a community. These residents express concerns about hyperscale data centers and their potential noise pollution, significant water usage and huge amounts of electricity consumption.

There are also transparency concerns. In Boyd County, locals packed a convention center to lambast local officials for signing non-disclosure agree-



YouTube screenshot

Daviess Fiscal Court recently voted to approve a 12-month moratorium on data center development while it studies impacts and potential protective ordinances.

ments with a data center developer that wants to build a massive operation in an industrial park.

Kentucky has had a number of smaller data centers that power various online services including digital cloud storage, but with the surge of artificial intelligence investment, enormous data centers termed as "hyperscale" that can consume the electricity equivalent of entire power plants have been proliferating across the country. Kentucky electric utilities have reported as many as 30 data centers are looking at locating in the state.

Castlen said the moratorium will allow time to research concerns residents have about the impacts of such operations, but he doesn't believe the county can prevent data centers from moving in.

"I think we can set rules in place to protect our citizens and to protect our community, but I don't think you can outright ban a business," Castlen said. "Our charge is to do our homework."

The GOP-controlled Kentucky Legislature during this year's session passed no bills regulating environmental or financial impacts of hyperscale data centers coming into the state.

One Republican-sponsored bill that would have required utilities to ensure the costs of infrastructure to serve large data center customers aren't borne by other ratepayers died on the final day of the session. Multiple utilities argue their own regulations and rates are already protective of electricity ratepayers.

Republican state senators

last week said they would be researching what kinds of data center-specific regulations are needed. Lawmakers wouldn't be able to pass a law until the legislature reconvenes for its regular session next year, unless Gov. Andy Beshear calls for a special session.

In the meantime, local governments large and small have been trying to advance their own data center regulations and moratoriums after hearing constituent concerns.

The city council in Cave City, a community of about 2,400 near Mammoth Cave National Park, passed a one-year moratorium last month after local leaders said they were approached by a data center developer. The West Kentucky city of Murray is advancing zoning regulations for data centers even though there have been no data center proposals there.

Republican Allen County Judge-Executive Dennis Harper, who represents a community of about 21,000 along the Tennessee border, said his government recently passed a 24-month moratorium on data center construction after seeing the "headaches" leaders in nearby Simpson County were having with a hyperscale data center proposal there.

"We felt like this would hopefully protect us until we get everything in line to see where we want them, if one decides to locate here," Harper said. "I would hate for something like that to locate next to me. It changes my lifestyle, a lot of noise pollution."

But in Louisville, a planning and zoning committee voted last week to table a six-month

moratorium proposed by City Council member Jenniffer Chappell, who said at the meeting she was "not willing to let Louisville be a guinea pig for these data centers."

Andrew Owen, chair of that committee, said in that meeting he viewed the moratorium as an "absolute last resort" and argued the committee could hold back the use of the moratorium until they needed it.

The Louisville Planning Commission in March approved a 1.6 million-square-foot data center in West Louisville despite local backlash.

The Bowling Green City Council also recently voted down a data center moratorium; the mayor argued the city shouldn't close off potential economic opportunities. In Kentucky's second-largest city of Lexington, the local government is considering a zoning ordinance to address data centers after a data center developer bought a \$29 million site in the city.

Chuck Charles, the mayor of Ashland, has seen the local pushback against a proposed hyperscale data center in the county and has tried to stay neutral on the topic. His city passed a six-month moratorium on data center applications earlier this year to study the issue more.

But he does wonder about what the data center influx could mean for his region, a place that saw industrial plants and jobs such as AK Steel eventually leave.

"It's gone and left all the aftermath here for us to take care of," Charles said. "Will it be the same thing with data centers? I don't know."

Trump names Morris as ambassador to Columbia

BY MCKENNA HORSLEY
KENTUCKY LANTERN



MCKENNA HORSLEY/Kentucky Lantern

Shown answering questions during his aborted U.S. Senate campaign, businessman Nate Morris has been nominated by President Trump as the next ambassador to Columbia.

President Donald Trump has nominated former Republican U.S. Senate candidate Nate Morris to become ambassador to Columbia.

Morris' nomination was among dozens sent Monday evening to the U.S. Senate for confirmation.

Morris had been one of several Republicans vying to succeed Kentucky U.S. Sen. Mitch McConnell, but he dropped out of the race ahead of the primary last month after Trump endorsed another GOP candidate, U.S. Rep. Andy Barr.

Trump said on Truth Social at the time that he had met with Morris and "asked Nate to step aside from that race to take a role in my administration as an ambassador."

"Nate is Oxford educated, tough as nails, LOVES our Great Nation, and will represent the United States very well, overseas, or otherwise," the president said. "He has a great future in politics, or anything else he chooses to do."

Barr won the Republican primary and now faces Democrat Charles Booker in the general election.

Morris is a Lexington

businessman who founded waste and recycling company Rubicon. He is the chairman and CEO of Morris Industries.

Throughout his campaign, Morris was highly critical of McConnell and had support from some of the presidents' allies. Morris announced his campaign on Donald Trump Jr.'s "Triggered" podcast and highlighted his friendship with Vice President J.D. Vance. Elon Musk, the billionaire and former special government employee who oversaw the Department of Government Efficiency, gave \$10 million to a PAC supporting Morris.

Man accused of collectible bourbon fraud

BY PAXTON MEDIA GROUP

Madisonville Police Department and UPS investigators uncovered an alleged bourbon sales scam that authorities say defrauded victims in multiple states out of more than \$86,000.

According to police, UPS investigator Matt Dawson contacted the Madisonville Police Department on May 29 regarding a possible organized fraud scheme involving James Willetts and several associates.

Dawson reported that Willetts allegedly used Facebook bourbon groups to sell collectible bottles of bourbon, then shipped packages con-

taining items such as water bottles and apple juice bottles instead of the advertised products.

Dawson told investigators that Willetts and some associates had been shipping packages from the Madisonville UPS location and providing buyers with tracking numbers and receipts to support the transactions. UPS began receiving complaints from customers who said they discovered the packages contained substitute items rather than the high-value bourbon bottles they had purchased.

On June 1, Dawson

met with investigators at the Madisonville Police Department and provided additional information regarding the alleged scheme. He said the first suspicious incident occurred Jan. 15, when Willetts reportedly shipped multiple empty boxes to a customer in Oklahoma.



James Willetts

According to Dawson, the shipment cost \$918. When questioned by a UPS employee about sending numerous empty boxes, Willetts allegedly said the shipments were intended as a prank.

Dawson said UPS has

received similar complaints over the past six months from customers who reported receiving packages containing water bottles or apple juice bottles instead of collectible bourbon.

Investigators reviewed UPS shipping records and receipts that allegedly showed Willetts had shipped numerous packages connected to the complaints. Police then began contacting potential victims identified through the shipping records.

Authorities said they have spoken with four identified victims in Kentucky, Oklahoma and Florida. The transactions involved approx-

imately 97 collectible bourbon bottles that were allegedly sold but never delivered as advertised. Police estimate the total loss at approximately \$86,140.

A search warrant was executed at a location associated with the investigation. During the search, investigators reportedly recovered multiple boxes and packaging materials that they said were consistent with the alleged scam.

The investigation remains ongoing and no additional details immediately were available.

Willetts was arrested Wednesday and released Thursday after posting a \$10,000 cash bond.