THE LAND OF INOPPORTUNITY

CLOSING THE CHILDHOOD EQUITY GAP FOR AMERICA'S KIDS

U.S. COMPLEMENT TO THE GLOBAL CHILDHOOD REPORT 2020

CONTENTS

McDowell County, West Virginia

The Land of Inopportunity: Closing the Childhood Equity Gap for America's Kids

Where a child grows up can determine their prospects in life more than you might guess. In most states across America, there are stark differences between communities that provide children the childhoods they deserve, and those where childhoods end too soon. These disparities threaten the future of our next generation, and they are being magnified by the effects of the coronavirus pandemic.

In its *2020 U.S. Complement to the Global Childhood Report*, Save the Children has examined data from more than 2,600 counties and county-equivalents in all 50 states to create a first-ever ranking of counties where children are most and least prioritized and protected. The rankings are based on four factors that end childhood: malnutrition, poor education, teenage pregnancy and early death due to ill health, accident, murder or suicide.

Applying the latest data on these four factors to counties across the country, Save the Children found that the U.S. counties that best protect and provide for their children are: Hunterdon (New Jersey), York (Virginia), Oldham (Kentucky), Ozaukee (Wisconsin) and Carroll (Maryland).

The five counties where childhoods are cut short the most are: Kusilvak (Alaska), Todd (South Dakota), Madison (Louisiana), Corson (South Dakota) and Bethel (Alaska).

Among the report's other major findings:

- In nearly every state, there are big gaps between the best and worst counties for children. Children in the most disadvantaged counties die at rates up to 5 times those of their peers in the same state. They are 3 times as likely to lack healthy food and consistent meals. They are 14 times as likely to drop out of high school. And girls get pregnant up to 26 times more often.
- States where disparities are less pronounced are: Delaware, Hawaii, Nevada, Arizona and New Hampshire.
- States where disparities are greatest are: Wisconsin, Minnesota, New Jersey and South Dakota.
- Over 9 million children live in the bottom quarter of ranked counties, most of which are poor and rural.[1] That

Every Child Has a Right To a Childhood

Childhood should be a time when our nation's youngest citizens develop into the adults who will care for and lead our country, our world, and our shared future. Every child deserves love, care and protection so they can develop to their full potential. Yet for millions of children in the United Sates – and hundreds of millions more children around the world – childhood is ending too soon.

means that more than 1 in every 8 children in America is experiencing shockingly high rates of food insecurity, school drop out, teenage pregnancy and/or child deaths.

- A sharp racial divide in America further complicates opportunities for children of color. While close to 90% of counties nationwide are majority white, about a third of the 50 bottom-ranked counties – where children's futures are most compromised – are majority African American and over a quarter are majority Native American.[2]

The data in this report were collected before the onset of the novel coronavirus pandemic, but there is mounting evidence that children in these impoverished – largely minority – communities will be hit hardest by this crisis. While COVID-19 has so far resulted in fewer and less severe cases among children,[3] it can decimate their lives in different ways. Children living in

vulnerable communities will suffer from the far-reaching economic and social impacts of the pandemic.

But location does not have to determine destiny. There are poor, rural counties that are beating the odds and giving their children the foundation they need for a successful future. Lauderdale County, Tennessee is an inspiring success story. Huerfano County, Colorado is another great example. Both are profiled in this report.

At the state level, this report finds children in New Jersey, Massachusetts and New Hampshire are much more likely to experience the joys and benefits of childhood than children in the nation's three lowest ranked states: Louisiana, Mississippi and New Mexico.

The report also provides evidence that political will and investments in children are paying off. States that spend more on children tend to have better outcomes for children. Similarly, states with elected officials who prioritize legislation to improve conditions for children tend to rank higher than states where political leaders do not make children a priority.

Closing state-level equity gaps and making all U.S. counties great places to raise kids would give millions more children full childhoods that set them up for successful futures. If each county protected and provided for its children as well as the highest ranked county in its state, 3.5 million fewer children would struggle with hunger, 130,000 fewer teens would give birth, and 15,000 fewer children would die each year.

In this election year, Save the Children is urging all candidates for elected office – at the presidential, federal, state and local levels – to prioritize investments in our children. We also urge voters to support policies and candidates that will give children the best possible start in life.

ABOUT THE 2020 END OF CHILDHOOD INDEX

Save the Children's fourth annual *Global Childhood Report* evaluates the best and worst countries for children by examining factors that rob children of their childhoods around the world, such as child labor, teen births, exclusion

COVID-19 Pandemic Increases Risks for the Most Vulnerable Children

How COVID-19 could impact children in U.S. communities that are least equipped to provide support:

Health – Poorer children are more likely to have certain underlying health conditions such as asthma and may be at higher risk for severe illness.[4]

Learning loss – The poorest children tend to have the fewest learning materials at home. And millions, especially in rural areas, lack high-speed internet and digital devices necessary for distance learning.[5] According to a national survey, 2 in 3 parents in America worry their child won't be ready for school in the fall, and more than half of children ages 6 to 18 reported similar concerns.[6]

Hunger – 30 million children in the U.S. depend on school for one or more of their meals.[7] School closures and loss of family income mean food insecurity rates will rise.[8]

Violence – Social disruption and high stress at home can have a devastating impact on children. Tens of thousands of kids now face an increased risk of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation.[9]

Emotional well-being – In April, when children in America were asked how they were feeling, 49% were worried a relative will contract the virus. Half reported being bored or worried. 1 in 3 reported being scared. And 1 in 4 reported being anxious, confused, stressed and/or unhappy.[10]

Akeri lives in the Delta region of Mississippi, where poverty is widespread and communities have few resources to support families hurt by the pandemic.

Photo: Susan Warner / Save the Children

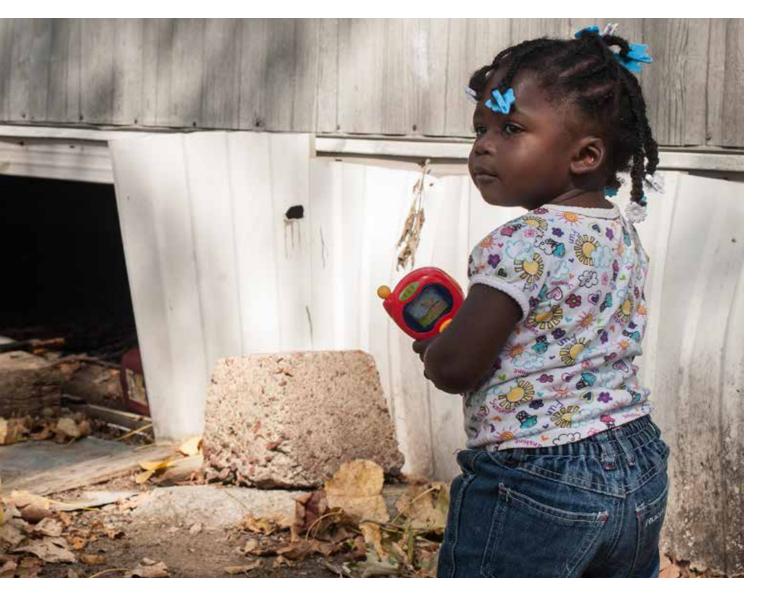from education and children fleeing conflict zones.

In this year's analysis, the United States trails nearly all other advanced countries in helping children reach their full potential. The U.S. scores 942 out of 1,000, tied with China and Montenegro, and is in 43rd place out of 180 countries. This is at least 30 points behind most Western European countries. While the country's overall score increased by 1 point since last year, progress is slow and conditions remain troubling for America's kids.

The *End of Childhood State Ranking* takes a closer look at the major reasons why childhoods are ending too soon in America as measured by five factors.

The county-level ranking drills down further to reveal how statewide averages can hide alarming disparities between the best and worst off children in specific locations. It measures essentially the same set of childhood factors, with some adjustments to account for smaller populations at the county level. See the Methodology and Research Notes for a complete explanation of how each ranking was calculated.

What is Robbing Children Of Their Childhoods?

ENDER	INDICATOR
Child dies	Infant mortality rate
Child is malnourished	Child food insecurity rate
Child drops out of school	Rate of children not graduating from high school on time
Child has a child	Adolescent birth rate
Child is a victim of violence	Child homicide and suicide rate

State-Level Findings – Millions of Childhoods Cut Short

Save the Children's *End of Childhood State Ranking* shows which states are succeeding, and which ones are failing, to provide conditions that nurture and protect children. While there have been major advances for children in the United States over the past 30 years, the U.S. still trails most advanced countries, largely because of the huge disparities highlighted in this report.

This year's state ranking reveals children in New Jersey, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Connecticut and Iowa are far more likely to experience safe and healthy childhoods than children in Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Arkansas. Each state's rank was determined by averaging its ranking for the five factors that cut childhoods short.

2020 FINDINGS

- Since the last ranking in 2018, Montana has made the most progress, moving up 10 spots, while Kansas has dropped more than any other state (down 9 spots). Montana has shown improvement across the board, most notably in the reduction of teen births, infant mortality and violent deaths.
- Mississippi has the nation's highest rate of children dying before their first birthday: 8.5 deaths per 1,000 live births – well above the national average of 5.6. The nation's lowest infant death rates are found in New Hampshire and New Jersey.
- Food insecurity rates for children across America remain high, with 17% of all children living in households that lack access to adequate food sometime during the year. Over 1.6 million children in California and nearly 1.7 million children in Texas were at risk of hunger in 2017. New Mexico and Arkansas were the states with the highest child food insecurity rates: 24.1% and 23.6% respectively. This is more than twice the rates in Massachusetts and North Dakota.
- Nationwide, 15% of high school students failed to graduate on time during the 2016-2017 school year.

Millions of Children Are Missing Out on Childhood In the United States*

- About 520,000 youth dropped out of high school in 2017.[11]
- More than 11 million children lived in households with food insecurity in 2018.[12]
- Nearly 180,000 babies were born to girls aged 15 to 19 in 2018.[13]
- 21,467 babies died before their first birthday in 2018.[14]
- 5,700 children were murdered or committed suicide in 2018.

* Children often experience more than one childhood ender. See Methodology and Research Notes for details.

Iowa had the lowest percentage of students not graduating on time, with a rate of 9%, closely followed by New Jersey at 9.5%. The states with the highest percentage of students not graduating on time were New Mexico (28.9%) and Oregon (23.3%).
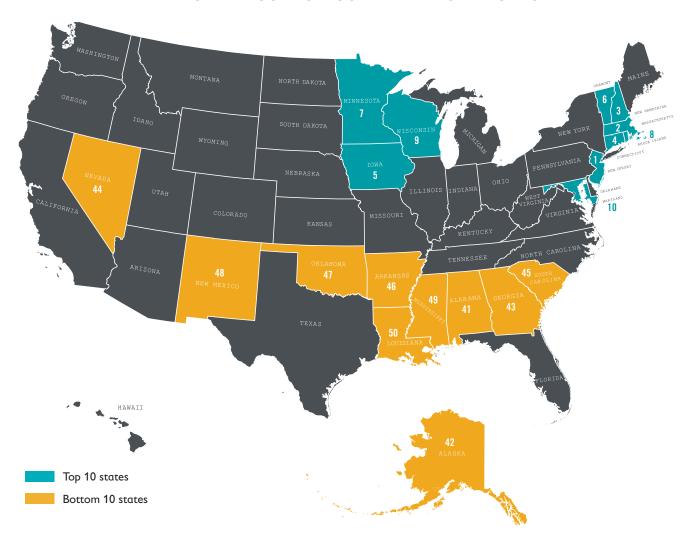- Alaska and South Dakota had the highest rates of violent deaths, as measured by homicides and suicides

among children aged 0 to 19, each with over 14 violent deaths per 100,000 children – twice the national average of 7. Other states with double-digit violent death rates are: New Mexico (12.8), Missouri (11.9), Montana (11.4), Mississippi (10.7), South Carolina (10.6), Nevada (10.5), Tennessee (10.5), Alabama (10.4), Louisiana (10.4) and Colorado (10.1).

- Arkansas reported the highest teen birth rate in 2018 at 30.4 births per 1,000 females aged 15 to 19 – a rate almost twice the national average of 17.4. Four states – Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Vermont – reported fewer than 10 births per 1,000 girls.

Top 10
Where childhood is most protected

Bottom 10
Where childhood is most threatened

RANK	STATE	RANK	STATE
1	New Jersey	41	Alabama
2	Massachusetts	42	Alaska
3	New Hampshire	43	Georgia
4	Connecticut	44	Nevada
5	Iowa	45	South Carolina
6	Vermont	46	Arkansas
7	Minnesota	47	Oklahoma
8	Rhode Island	48	New Mexico
9	Wisconsin	49	Mississippi
10	Maryland	50	Louisiana

WHERE CHILDHOOD IS MOST AND LEAST PROTECTED

Top 10 states
Bottom 10 states

County-Level Findings – Where Are the Greatest Disparities?

Many Americans think of child deprivation as an urban issue. But rural child poverty rates are higher than urban rates in 41 of 47 states with rural designated areas.[15] Across America, 84% of the counties where the most children struggle with hunger are rural and high poverty.[16] Three-fifths (59%) of counties with the highest teen birth rates are rural and high poverty. And over half (54%) of counties where the most children are dying are rural and high poverty.[17]

Among the more than 2,600 counties examined, counties that ranked the lowest overall (in the bottom 50) are mostly rural, poor, concentrated in the south and are communities of color. Only three rural counties – one each in Colorado, New Hampshire and Vermont – make the top 50 list – while 46 of the bottom counties (92%) are rural.

Child poverty rates across the 50 lowest ranked counties are 5 times higher than rates across the 50 highest ranked counties. Child poverty rates in the bottom 5 counties are over 8 times higher than rates across the top 5 counties.

Over 9 million children live in the lowest ranked counties (bottom 25%), and they are facing huge challenges to growing up safe and secure. Consider these alarming disparities among children in the highest and lowest ranked counties in each state:

- **Children in the most disadvantaged counties die at rates up to 5 times those of children in the highest ranked counties.** In Virginia, for example, York County has a child death rate of 27 per 100,000, while in Petersburg City the rate is 128 per 100.
- **Children struggle with hunger at rates 3 times as high.** In Kentucky, 12% of children in Oldham County are at risk of hunger, compared to 30% of children in Clay County.
- **Children are 14 times as likely to drop out of school or repeat grades.** In Lincoln Parish, Louisiana, 4% of children fail to graduate on time, but in Madison Parish, 60% of children do not finish high school in four years.
- **Girls get pregnant up to 26 times more often.** In Wisconsin, Ozaukee County has a teen birth rate of 2 per 1,000, while in Menominee County the rate is 55 per 1,000.

While these data were collected before the coronavirus crisis, there are many indications that conditions for the most marginalized children are being made worse by the pandemic. Most of the bottom 50 counties are places the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says are highly vulnerable to "stresses on human health" because of a combination of factors – including poverty, unemployment, low levels of education, crowded housing and lack of access to transportation. And these are places with few tools to fight infectious diseases. Conversely, the top 50 counties that do best on the childhood ranking tend to have very low vulnerability scores.[18]

Save the Children also examined statewide data overall to determine where opportunities for children at the county level are most and least fair. The most equal states in America (in descending order) are New Hampshire, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Delaware and Vermont. The most unequal states (in descending order) are Virginia, Maryland, Montana, Alaska and South Dakota. The most equal states have counties with more similar ranks. The most unequal states have county ranks that are much more spread out. Not surprisingly, more equal states also tend to have a smaller childhood equity gap between their highest and lowest ranked counties.[19]

10 MORE THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT CHILDHOOD INEQUALITY IN AMERICA

1. **Pockets of promise and great disadvantage exist in nearly every state.** Forty-five states (all but Arizona, Arkansas, Delaware, Louisiana and Nevada)

have a county in the top 25% of counties nationwide where childhood is most protected. And 39 states have a county in the bottom 25% of counties nationwide where childhood is most threatened.

2. **Four states have counties at both extremes.** Georgia, Minnesota, Virginia and Wisconsin all have a county in the top 50 and the bottom 50 counties (roughly the top and bottom 2% of counties nationally).

3. **New Jersey has the most high performing counties for children, but there's great inequality of opportunity.** New Jersey has 6 of the 20 best ranked counties in the nation. But while overall it does very well on both the state and the county-level rankings, it's a highly inequitable state. Children in the worst county (Cumberland) are 7 times as likely to have their childhoods cut short as children in Hunterdon (the best county in New Jersey and in the U.S. overall). Only two states — Minnesota and Wisconsin — have larger gaps between their highest and lowest ranked counties.

4. **Mississippi has the most low-ranked counties.** One-fifth of the bottom 50 counties (11) are in Mississippi. Louisiana is the second worst, with 7 counties in the bottom 50.

5. **Mississippi, Nevada, Oklahoma and South Carolina may be among the worst states for children in the nation, but they are also among the most equitable.** These states do poorly overall on the state ranking and they have relatively small equity gaps.[20] This means inopportunity is widespread in these states.

6. **Many children in Georgia and Louisiana are particularly disadvantaged.** These states do poorly overall on the state ranking and have some of the largest equity gaps between counties.[21]

7. **The highest food insecurity rate in the nation is in East Carroll Parish, Louisiana, where 40% of children struggle with hunger.** This is comparable to child food insecurity rates in Bangladesh and Peru, and higher than the rates in Egypt and Mali.[22] Slope County, North Dakota has the lowest child hunger rate in the country — 6%.

8. **More children die in Jackson County, South Dakota than in any other U.S. county.** One child in 420 dies each year. This is comparable to child death rates (ages 0-14) in Cambodia and Iraq.[23] Bristol County, Rhode Island has the lowest child death rate in the country, with 1 child in 6,400 dying each year.

9. **There are five counties in Texas where 1 in 14 girls give birth each year.** The counties are: Brooks, Deaf Smith, Moore, Presidio and Reeves. These are some of the highest adolescent birth rates in the U.S. — comparable to Afghanistan and Senegal, and higher than Haiti and Indonesia.[24] The lowest teen birth rates in the country are in Manassas Park City, Virginia and Hampshire, Massachusetts, where only about 1 in 1,000 girls gives birth each year.

10. **On-time graduation rates are lowest in Wheeler County, Oregon, where 74% of children fail to complete high school on time.** Compared to Page County, Virginia — where only 0.4% of students fail to graduate on time — children in Wheeler County are 185 times more likely to miss out on education. Dozens of counties across 14 states reportedly have on-time graduation rates of 100% (although almost all of them are less-populous rural areas with small numbers of children). Six counties have on-time graduation rates at or below 50%, meaning most kids in these counties do not do well in school. These counties are Inyo (California), Madison (Louisiana), Mono (California), Nevada (California), Treasure (Montana) and Wheeler (Oregon).

McDowell County, West Virginia

Photo: Victoria Zegler / Save the Children

A Tale of Two Counties in West Virginia

"These mountains have protected families, but they have also isolated families," said Tamela Sparks, a special education facilitator in McDowell County, West Virginia. She says the county's children can sometimes "get lost in the shuffle."

Surrounded by the Appalachians, McDowell is the Mountain State's southernmost county, and it's also the state's lowest ranked county for children, according to the analysis in this report. Its once-thriving coal industry has experienced a sharp decline in the past 15 years, leaving few job opportunities. The schools, a local prison and the state highway department are now among the county's largest employers.

McDowell is the state's poorest county, with 43% of children growing up in poverty. Many kids grapple with hunger — 28% lack reliable access to sufficient food. One in every 6 students in the county — or 17% — are not graduating high school on time, and 1 in 21 girls aged 15 to 19 give birth each year — one of the highest teen birth rates in the state.

"I was raised in a coal family. My dad was a coal miner for 20-plus years, and a lot of what McDowell County knows is the coal industry," said Heather, a mother raising three children in the county. "It's a struggle for a lot of families because that's their trade, and when coal leaves, the businesses leave."

Putnam County, about 100 miles away, is the best ranked county in the state for children. Compared to Putnam, children in McDowell County are twice as likely to struggle with hunger and not graduate on time, and nearly 3 times as likely to not survive childhood. Adolescent girls are 4 times as likely to have a baby.

With the isolation of the surrounding mountains, the dwindling jobs and the steady loss of business, children and families in McDowell County also lack access to critical services. There's no hospital in the county where a mom can deliver a baby or receive prenatal care. Pediatric services are limited, so many parents must take their kids out of the county to see a doctor. Parents seeking developmental support and testing for their children — including genetic and autism assessments — need to

2-year-old Elsa plays in the yard outside her home in McDowell County, West Virginia. Elsa has been in Save the Children's Early Steps to School Success program since she was 5 months old.

Photo: Victoria Zegler / Save the Children

travel up to two hours or more for such services.

Save the Children's home visiting program helped determine that Heather's 33-month-old daughter, Elsa, is experiencing developmental delays. But the 35-year-old mom says it's been challenging to get the specialized support the toddler needs because of where they live. "The help Elsa needs is in different communities in different counties of the state, so we have to travel a lot."

Many McDowell County families also struggle to provide food for their children — especially healthy food — and rely on local churches, community centers and schools for support. These options are limited, and some families may need to travel up to 25 miles or more to go to a well-stocked food pantry. This can be difficult if they don't have a reliable vehicle, in an area with no public transportation or major highways.

The state's highest ranked county for children, Putnam, is the second wealthiest in the state, with a median household income more than double that of McDowell County. Its more accessible location and greater family resources are major factors giving children a good chance to reach their full potential. A major interstate highway runs through Putnam County, and the state's largest cities, Charleston and Huntington, are within a 30-minute drive. Community leaders say nearly any chosen career path is possible for Putnam County's kids. As children grow and begin to turn an eye toward their futures, there are at least three universities within a 30-minute drive.

For most families in Putnam County, developmental services and medical specialists are minutes away. "It's all right here, right in the middle of Putnam County," said Scott Edwards, mayor of one of Putnam's cities. "Even if you live in the furthest place in the county, it's a 20-minute drive."

Beyond location and access, the mayor cites a sense of community as a main factor in supporting the county's children. "The whole county, we all come together as one anytime it's needed," said the father of four. "No matter the income level — high or low, in the middle — everyone seems to be together as one and we like that."

Despite the disparities in McDowell County, there's no shortage of community spirit there either, say community leaders and families in the county.

"We all are a family. Anywhere you go, any people you meet, they're always there for you. They got your back," said Tiffany, a 25-year-old McDowell County mother raising a 2-year-old daughter. "It's a good little place. It just needs more, I think — more things to do, more jobs, more help, more support."

Parents and children enjoy a well-equipped playground in Putnam County, West Virginia.

Underlying Disparities Mean Mississippi's Kids Are Hit Hard by COVID-19

"Why did this happen? When is COVID going to leave?" These are some of the questions 5-year-old Khloe asked her grandmother as she tried to keep up with schoolwork at home in Bolivar County, Mississippi. Her grandmother, Sharon, said it's been hard to keep Khloe motivated to do her school assignments.

Lack of food has also been a problem for families in Bolivar County, especially those who relied on school lunches. At the beginning of the stay-at-home order, the school district gave out "grab-and-go" lunches, but later they stopped the service out of concern for staff safety.

In nearby Coahoma and Quitman counties, parents and grandparents who have lost jobs and child care services said they felt "stressed," "overwhelmed" and "anxious." They described their children as "confused," "lonely" and "depressed."

"It's hard to keep food in the home because of unemployment," said Kimberly, a mother of two teenagers who lost her job when the nearby casino was closed.

These Mississippi Delta counties are among the poorest and lowest ranked places for children in this report. They are also among the least able to prevent human suffering and financial loss resulting from the pandemic, according to the CDC.[25]

"Some areas have more resources than others," said Yolanda Minor, deputy director for Save the Children programs in Mississippi. "The majority African-American communities, especially, have fewer things like food pantries."

As the pandemic forces new problems on struggling families, it has put children's futures at even higher risk.

"Many families here don't have computers or access to the internet," said Shenika King, a Save the Children early childhood specialist based in Bolivar County. "The kids can't keep up with school."

Families are also having trouble with child care. "Schools were their only source of child care," said King. "They don't have anyone to tend to their babies now. Some are relying on friends. Some can't go to work because they have to stay home with their kids."

King worries about children's emotional health during this crisis. "The students are missing social interactions with their peers and teachers," she said. "School is so vital. The teachers give some of the only encouraging words some of these kids ever hear."

Save the Children is responding to the crisis by having its coordinators regularly check in on families, coaching parents on how to help kids with lessons, providing learning materials, assisting with food distributions and supplying other essentials such as diapers, wipes and hand sanitizer.

Denzel, age 21, and his 20-month-old daughter Akeri participate in Save the Children's early childhood development program in Mississippi's Delta region.

Closing the Childhood Equity Gap – Millions Could be Saved

Millions of poor and marginalized children in America do not get a fair chance to succeed in life because of where they're growing up. To change this, we must invest ambitiously in our country's children, focusing resources on the most deprived communities, to provide genuinely equal opportunity for all.

The benefits of investing in young children have been well documented. Children who have a solid start in life tend to do better in school, be healthier, and more prosperous as adults. When the most disadvantaged children are lifted up, society benefits from increased tax revenues and less government spending required for special education, welfare and criminal justice.

Nearly 90% of brain development happens by age 5, setting the foundation for lifelong health, learning and behavior. Some of the most effective programs focusing on Pre-K development include home visits to help expectant parents make healthy choices before and after childbirth, and high-quality early childhood education to nurture children's social, emotional, cognitive and physical development.

Not surprisingly, states that invest the most in children tend to rank higher on the state ranking. Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and New Jersey are among the top 10 states that spend the most per child – including spending on K-12 education, health, income security and social services – and they all place in the top 5.[26]

States that invest the least in children tend to do poorly on the ranking. Alabama, Arizona, Louisiana, Mississippi, Nevada, Oklahoma and Tennessee are all low-spending states, and they are some of the lowest ranked states.[27]

Political will is also important. Where state representatives are working for children, children do better. The Children's Defense Fund recently evaluated the legislative actions each Member of Congress has taken for children.[28] There is a clear relationship between the grade legislators received and the state's placement on Save the Children's ranking.[29] Most states at the top of the ranking have legislators who received an A grade on average, while legislators in the bottom-ranked states received an average grade of C.[30]

HOW MANY CHILDREN COULD BE SAVED?

If childhood equity gaps were closed in all 50 states, we would see dramatic improvements for America's children. Save the Children has estimated how many childhoods could be saved if all counties become great places to raise kids.

If each state performed as well overall as its highest ranked county on each indicator – in other words, if state-level childhood equity gaps were closed completely – there would be 3.5 million fewer food-insecure children, 130,000 fewer babies born to adolescent girls and 15,000 fewer child deaths.

If this goal were met:

- **The number of children struggling with hunger would fall by a quarter** (26%). In California, there would be 470,000 fewer hungry children and in Texas, there would be 460,000 fewer. Child food insecurity would drop by 35% in Michigan, North Dakota and West Virginia. It would drop 36% in Kentucky and 37% in Tennessee. And in Virginia, there would be 41% fewer hungry children.
- **The number of teen births nationwide would be reduced by over 70%.** In Texas, there would be 19,000 fewer teen births each year, and in California, there would be 11,000 fewer. Eliminating inequities in Maryland, New Jersey and Wisconsin, would lead to 85% fewer teen births. The reduction would be 88% in Georgia and 94% in Virginia.
- **2 of every 5 child deaths would be prevented** (44%). Some of the greatest gains would be made in Georgia, Iowa, Missouri, Rhode Island and Tennessee, where child death rates under age 18 would fall by 60% or more. Closing survival gaps would mean 1,400 fewer deaths per year in Texas and 1,700 fewer deaths in California.

Children enjoy early learning activities at a Save the Children Head Start Center in Louisiana.

Children at its Heart – Lauderdale County, Tennessee

Tucked in the southwest corner of Tennessee – its western border carved by the Mississippi River – is Lauderdale County. It's a county filled with small town charm and hospitality, despite high levels of unemployment and limited job opportunities due to factory closures, shifts in industry and major infrastructure and transportation challenges. With a child poverty rate of 35%, 1 in 3 kids are growing up impoverished, yet children in Lauderdale County are succeeding – the county is among the nation's top counties for on-time high school graduation.

However, it wasn't always this way. A decade ago, the county's high school graduation rate was an alarming 70%, meaning 1 in 3 children were not earning their diploma or an equivalent, such as a GED.[31] County leaders were concerned, so they developed innovative solutions to "get kids across the finish line," according to Superintendent Shawn Kimble.

The county launched SEGA – the Secondary Education Graduation Academy – which supports students facing challenging circumstances like caring for a sick parent or sibling, or a parent becoming incarcerated, and provides 1:1 support to ensure they achieve the credits they need to graduate. In addition, the county hired graduation coaches for both high schools and also added career counselors and college readiness coordinators across the district.

Superintendent Kimble underscored the county's commitment to preventing children's life challenges from triggering school drop outs. They embrace flexibility while working with students to complete required credits. "As a district," he says, "our main goal is to remove barriers for students to be successful."

It's not just the school district working to ensure the success of Lauderdale's children. Local business leaders, teachers, faith-based organizations, community advocates and elected officials all play an active role. Other groups like the Nelson Resource Center and Save the Children also contribute to making children in Lauderdale a top priority. "Children are our most valuable asset," said County Mayor Maurice Gaines. "We're going to depend on them to run our country, to make sure that our local communities strive and keep moving forward."

Photo: Victoria Zegler / Save the Children

Lisa, left, and her daughters Betheney, 7, and Courtney, 14, read a storybook together in an elementary school library in Lauderdale County, Tennessee. Courtney is a freshman in high school and has participated in Save the Children programs since she was in elementary school. "Graduating high school is very important to me because I would like to fulfill my dreams," said Courtney.

Students enjoy a healthy snack in an afterschool program at their elementary school in southern Colorado.

CASE STUDY

How One Poor, Rural County in Colorado Is Feeding its Children

Among the nation's poorest counties, alarmingly large numbers of children miss meals and go to bed hungry on a regular basis. Ensuring more poor children get the nutritious food they need is not an easy task, but Save the Children has identified a number of poor rural counties where state and local officials are working together and making a huge difference.

Huerfano County in southern Colorado has one of the highest child poverty rates in the nation at 37%. This is higher than 95% of U.S. counties. But Huerfano ranks in the top third of all counties nationwide in meeting the dietary needs of children.

Why is this very poor rural county doing so well in combatting childhood hunger? Officials point to two federal programs, known as WIC and SNAP, as the most important reasons that fewer of Huerfano's children are hungry. State and county officials have made extensive efforts to enroll Huerfano families into these programs. According to the latest available figures, Huerfano has 90% of eligible residents registered for SNAP and WIC, far higher than the national average.[32]

WIC, a supplemental nutrition program for women, infants and children, pays for specific foods to meet the nutritional needs of pregnant women, new mothers and young children. Participants also receive nutrition counseling and referrals for health services, such as prenatal programs. Meanwhile, SNAP provides benefits to eligible households to buy family groceries.

"SNAP and WIC are crucial to reducing hunger among children in Colorado," says Anya Rose, public policy manager for Hunger Free Colorado. "SNAP provides families about $257 on average each month to purchase groceries in Colorado, and WIC can provide a monthly value to families of up to $150 each month in nutrition benefits. These programs can make a big difference in a family's food budget."

The National School Lunch Program also helps reduce child hunger in Huerfano County, according to Rose. The county participates in a program that provides free meals to all children throughout the county's two school districts and even has one school offering after-school meals. When the coronavirus pandemic forced the closing of schools across Colorado, many school districts like those in Huerfano County worked with community sponsors to set up special locations where families could pick up free meals for children under 18. Huerfano County has set up meal sites in both of its school districts, but in late April, both districts were seeking additional funding to continue providing meals for kids.

Rose also praises the Colorado Department of Human Services for its efforts to simplify the often-complicated and confusing application process for families to enroll in SNAP.

"Last year, for the first time, the state helped to draw down additional federal funding for SNAP outreach by allocating state budget funds to help enroll more Coloradans living in rural and frontier counties," Rose said. In addition, she noted, over the past few years, Colorado WIC has rolled out a series of improvements, including telephone and online meeting options, statewide online referral forms and text communications, to improve client experience and make enrolling easier.

Advocating for America's Kids

Every child deserves a chance to succeed, yet for too many of America's children, their chance at success is severely limited simply because of the county where they live. The coronavirus pandemic has made these inequalities all the more stark. Save the Children is committed to ensuring every last child reaches his or her fullest potential. In the United States, that means both serving and advocating for children, especially those who are overlooked and underserved.

INVESTING IN OUR FUTURE

The data in this report make it clear we are far from ensuring that all children in America have the opportunity to prosper. Millions of children in the U.S. are excluded from progress, especially those living in marginalized, vulnerable counties. This report highlights an unacceptable reality in America, where one child can be exponentially more likely than another to succeed in life based solely on the county where they grow up. The data make clear that simple geography is one of the biggest single impediments to the noble ideal of equal opportunity for all.

We therefore call on policymakers at all levels of government to robustly support the welfare and development of all children, regardless of where they reside. To achieve this objective, all levels of government must work together – along with the private sector – to craft strong policies, provide sufficient resources, and create an appropriate regulatory environment for relevant early childhood programs and interventions to flourish.

Leaders can use the data in this report to direct targeted, new investments toward the children in the counties that need it the most and where too many children are being left behind and marginalized. A child does not decide where to live, and where a child lives should not decide their future.

EARLY INVESTMENTS CREATE THE GREATEST RETURNS

High-quality early childhood programs are a great investment and actually help save taxpayers' money in the long run. A recent report from Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman shows the return on investment for early childhood development for disadvantaged children can be 13% per child, per year, due to improved outcomes in education, health and economic productivity. Children who have participated in a high-quality early education program often earn higher incomes, are more likely to graduate from high school and are less likely to be arrested for a violent crime.[33]

Creating a more successful generation of children will benefit the nation as a whole for decades to come. Today's children are tomorrow's engineers, teachers and business leaders. We often hear leaders complain about the debt we are leaving for our children and grandchildren. Why not invest in them so we make sure they are better off?

Federal programs including Head Start, Early Head Start, Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) and Child Care Development Block Grants are essential, but they do not serve even half of the children who are eligible. More investment is needed in order to serve our nation's most vulnerable children. Even as we work to protect and grow these proven programs, we must also increase the investment of state and local resources in high-quality early childhood programs. Early childhood education programs in particular have long been underfunded and unequally distributed, with more than half of all children living in a "child care desert,"[34] and almost 1 in 10 parents having to quit or change their job due to a lack of accessible child care.[35] The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated these already significant problems, with early education programs across the country closed and unsure of their ability to reopen even once it is safe to do so.[36]

The need for increased federal funding for early education has never been so acute, and the efforts to rebuild the economy after this pandemic present an opportunity to invest in children and families across the country. This is a need that the American public recognizes: an April 2020 national poll commissioned by Save the Children Action

Network, the advocacy arm of Save the Children, indicates 80% of voters support targeted federal assistance for the child care industry.[37] Child care is an investment in our future, and a key part of the path toward a healthier and more equal country.

SERVING THE WHOLE CHILD

Children are complex and impacted by a variety of factors in their daily environment. While Save the Children provides early childhood education services in communities across the country, our programs recognize that children do not exist in a vacuum. We have programs that seek to address children's social and emotional growth as well as improve their educational achievement and always take a collective impact and community approach to serving children.

Similarly, government policies must seek to serve the whole child. An investment in education does not eliminate all the risks highlighted in this report. Investments must be made in wrap-around services that provide for the whole child's well-being and growth. This includes, but is not limited to: education, mental and physical health, continued access to healthy meals, nutrition and housing. These issues interact with each other in visible and invisible ways and set the path for the future of the child.

In addition, each of these programs should not stand alone. They should complement each other by offering referrals and assistance in determining which programs are best suited to help a child.

8-year-olds Brantley, left, and Shikiera from Tennessee have a message for all Americans.

Photo: Victoria Zegler / Save the Children

Alphabetical State Ranking

RANK		STATE	AVERAGE RANK, ALL 5 ENDERS
41	^	Alabama	35.4
42		Alaska	36.6
38	v	Arizona	33.4
46	v	Arkansas	39.2
13	^	California	17.8
21		Colorado	23.4
4	^	Connecticut	8.2
24		Delaware	24.8
31	^	Florida	29.0
43	^	Georgia	36.8
25	v	Hawaii	25.2
23		Idaho	24.4
19	^	Illinois	21.4
39	v	Indiana	34.0
5	^	Iowa	10.6
34	v	Kansas	31.6
28	^	Kentucky	25.6
50		Louisiana	46.2
17	v	Maine	18.8
10	^	Maryland	16.6
2		Massachusetts	4.8
30	v	Michigan	27.0
7	v	Minnesota	13.0
49		Mississippi	44.8
34	v	Missouri	31.6
25	^	Montana	25.2
12	^	Nebraska	17.6
44	v	Nevada	37.0
3	^	New Hampshire	5.4
1		New Jersey	4.2
48	v	New Mexico	42.0
14	v	New York	18.0
31	^	North Carolina	29.0
14	v	North Dakota	18.0
39		Ohio	34.0
47	^	Oklahoma	40.0
22		Oregon	24.0
18		Pennsylvania	20.4
8	^	Rhode Island	14.2
45	v	South Carolina	38.4
33	v	South Dakota	31.2
36	^	Tennessee	33.2
27	v	Texas	25.4
16	v	Utah	18.6
6	v	Vermont	12.2
11	v	Virginia	17.2
19	v	Washington	21.4
36	v	West Virginia	33.2
9	^	Wisconsin	15.6
29	^	Wyoming	25.8

^ Rank is up from the 2018 U.S. Childhood Report

V Rank is down from the 2018 U.S. Childhood Report

6-year-old Lillian has been enrolled in both literacy and afterschool programs for two years in Clay County, Kentucky.

Complete Data: End of Childhood State Ranking 2020

		AVERAGE RANK, ALL 5 ENDERS	INFANT MORTALITY		CHILD FOOD INSECURITY		HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS		TEEN BIRTHS		HOMICIDES + SUICIDES		CHANGE IN RANK (2018-2020)
			RATE*	RANK	RATE	RANK	RATE	RANK	RATE‡	RANK	RATE§	RANK	
	United States	-	5.6	-	17.0%	-	15.4%	-	17.4	-	7.0	-	-
1	New Jersey	4.2	3.9	2	13.2%	5	9.5%	2	10.3	6	3.6	6	0
2	Massachusetts	4.8	4.1	5	11.7%	2	11.7%	12	7.2	1	2.9	4	0
3	New Hampshire	5.4	3.5	1	12.3%	3	11.1%	10	8.0	2	6.1	11	+1
4	Connecticut	8.2	4.2	6	15.5%	12	12.1%	15	8.3	3	3.1	5	+1
5	Iowa	10.6	5.0	12	15.3%	10	9.0%	1	15.3	19	6.1	11	+2
6	Vermont	12.2	6.2	33	15.9%	15	10.9%	8	8.8	4	--	1	-4
7	Minnesota	13.0	5.0	12	12.6%	4	17.3%	34	10.2	5	5.8	10	-1
8	Rhode Island	14.2	5.0	12	17.3%	21	15.9%	29	11.5	8	--	1	+1
9	Wisconsin	15.6	6.1	30	15.4%	11	11.4%	11	13.0	11	6.4	15	+4
10	Maryland	16.6	6.1	30	15.2%	9	12.3%	16	14.1	15	6.2	13	+9
11	Virginia	17.2	5.6	22	13.2%	5	13.1%	19	14.3	17	7.4	23	-3
12	Nebraska	17.6	5.8	24	17.4%	23	10.9%	8	16.7	24	4.5	9	+3
13	California	17.8	4.0	4	18.1%	29	17.3%	34	13.6	14	4.2	8	+1
14	New York	18.0	4.3	7	17.6%	28	18.2%	39	11.7	9	4.1	7	-3
14	North Dakota	18.0	5.5	20	9.8%	1	12.8%	17	16.4	23	8.0	29	-3
16	Utah	18.6	5.2	16	14.7%	8	14.0%	26	13.1	12	8.1	31	-6
17	Maine	18.8	5.4	18	18.5%	33	13.1%	19	11.1	7	6.7	17	-1
18	Pennsylvania	20.4	5.9	27	16.4%	18	13.4%	22	14.1	15	7.0	20	0
19	Illinois	21.4	6.4	35	15.7%	13	13.0%	18	15.8	20	7.1	21	+8
19	Washington	21.4	4.4	8	17.3%	21	20.6%	44	12.7	10	7.5	24	-2
21	Colorado	23.4	4.5	9	14.0%	7	20.9%	45	14.3	17	10.1	39	0
22	Oregon	24.0	3.9	2	18.9%	35	23.3%	49	13.3	13	7.1	21	0
23	Idaho	24.4	4.9	11	15.8%	14	20.3%	43	16.0	22	8.3	32	0
24	Delaware	24.8	5.8	24	17.0%	20	13.1%	19	16.7	24	9.6	37	0
25	Hawaii	25.2	6.7	38	17.5%	26	17.3%	34	17.2	27	--	1	-5
25	Montana	25.2	4.5	9	16.1%	17	14.2%	27	17.2	27	11.4	46	+10
27	Texas	25.4	5.3	17	22.5%	46	10.3%	4	25.3	42	6.9	18	-2
28	Kentucky	25.6	5.9	27	18.4%	32	10.3%	4	27.3	47	6.9	18	+9
29	Wyoming	25.8	5.1	15	17.4%	23	13.8%	25	20.8	37	8.0	29	+3
30	Michigan	27.0	6.2	33	15.9%	15	19.8%	42	15.8	20	7.7	25	-1
31	Florida	29.0	6.0	29	20.4%	41	17.7%	38	16.7	24	6.2	13	+2
31	North Carolina	29.0	6.7	38	20.1%	40	13.4%	22	18.7	29	6.5	16	+4
33	South Dakota	31.2	5.8	24	16.4%	18	16.3%	31	20.4	34	14.1	49	-3
34	Kansas	31.6	6.5	37	18.3%	30	13.5%	24	20.0	32	9.5	35	-9
34	Missouri	31.6	6.4	35	17.5%	26	11.7%	12	21.6	38	11.9	47	-6
36	Tennessee	33.2	7.1	44	18.9%	35	10.2%	3	25.3	42	10.5	42	+4
36	West Virginia	33.2	7.3	46	20.6%	42	10.6%	6	25.4	45	7.8	27	-5
38	Arizona	33.4	5.4	18	21.3%	43	22.0%	48	20.1	33	7.7	25	-4
39	Indiana	34.0	6.9	40	17.4%	23	16.2%	30	21.8	39	9.8	38	-1
39	Ohio	34.0	7.0	41	19.6%	37	15.8%	28	18.9	30	8.8	34	0
41	Alabama	35.4	7.1	44	22.3%	45	10.7%	7	25.2	41	10.4	40	+3
42	Alaska	36.6	5.6	22	18.7%	34	21.8%	46	19.3	31	14.4	50	0
43	Georgia	36.8	7.0	41	20.0%	38	19.4%	41	20.6	36	7.9	28	+1
44	Nevada	37.0	6.1	30	20.0%	38	19.1%	40	20.5	35	10.5	42	-1
45	South Carolina	38.4	7.3	46	18.3%	30	16.4%	32	22.0	40	10.6	44	-4
46	Arkansas	39.2	7.6	48	23.6%	49	12.0%	14	30.4	50	9.5	35	-2
47	Oklahoma	40.0	7.0	41	22.2%	44	17.4%	37	27.2	46	8.3	32	+1
48	New Mexico	42.0	5.5	20	24.1%	50	28.9%	50	25.3	42	12.8	48	-1
49	Mississippi	44.8	8.5	50	22.9%	47	17.0%	33	27.8	49	10.7	45	0
50	Louisiana	46.2	7.6	48	23.0%	48	21.9%	47	27.5	48	10.4	40	0
	District of Columbia	-	6.5	-	21.2%	-	26.8%	-	19.3	-	14.8	-	

<div>

■ Top performing states   ■ Bottom performing states

* Per 1,000 live births — Values are suppressed
‡ Per 1,000 girls aged 15 through 19 § Per 100,000 population aged 0 through 19

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Top 50 and Bottom 50 Counties

TOP 50 COUNTIES	Rank*
Hunterdon County, New Jersey	1
York County, Virginia	2
Oldham County, Kentucky	3
Ozaukee County, Wisconsin	4
Carroll County, Maryland	5
Loudoun County, Virginia	6
Dallas County, Iowa	7
Middlesex County, Connecticut	8
Bergen County, New Jersey	9
Williamson County, Tennessee	9
Morris County, New Jersey	11
Delaware County, Ohio	12
Sussex County, New Jersey	13
Somerset County, New Jersey	14
Calumet County, Wisconsin	15
Warren County, Iowa	16
Monmouth County, New Jersey	17
Waukesha County, Wisconsin	18
Norfolk County, Massachusetts	19
Middlesex County, Massachusetts	20
Carver County, Minnesota	21
Hanover County, Virginia	22
Poquoson City, Virginia	23
Warren County, Ohio	24
Goochland County, Virginia	25
Falls Church City, Virginia	26
Botetourt County, Virginia	27
Fauquier County, Virginia	28
Grundy County, Iowa	28
Kendall County, Illinois	30
DuPage County, Illinois	31
Iowa County, Wisconsin	32
Grafton County, New Hampshire	33
Rockingham County, New Hampshire	34
Putnam County, New York	35
Hendricks County, Indiana	36
Bucks County, Pennsylvania	37
Washington County, Wisconsin	37
Bremer County, Iowa	39
Forsyth County, Georgia	40
Hampshire County, Massachusetts	41
Monroe County, Illinois	42
Pitkin County, Colorado	43
Albemarle County, Virginia	44
Clinton County, Michigan	45
Calvert County, Maryland	46
Queen Anne's County, Maryland	47
Addison County, Vermont	48
Bristol County, Rhode Island	49
Nicollet County, Minnesota	50

	BOTTOM 50 COUNTIES	Rank*
$	*Screven County, Georgia*	2568
$	Petersburg City, Virginia	2569
$	Webster Parish, Louisiana	2570
$	*Luna County, New Mexico*	2571
$	*Dimmit County, Texas*	2572
$	*Mahnomen County, Minnesota*	2573
$	*Warren County, Mississippi*	2574
$	*Sunflower County, Mississippi*	2575
$	*Washington County, North Carolina*	2576
$	*Phillips County, Arkansas*	2577
$	*Dillingham Census Area, Alaska*	2578
$	*Concordia Parish, Louisiana*	2579
$	*McDowell County, West Virginia*	2580
$	*Putnam County, Florida*	2581
$	St. Helena Parish, Louisiana	2582
$	*Ben Hill County, Georgia*	2583
$	*Adair County, Oklahoma*	2584
$	*Sharkey County, Mississippi*	2585
$	*Adams County, Mississippi*	2586
$	*Jenkins County, Georgia*	2587
$	*St. Landry Parish, Louisiana*	2588
$	*Gila County, Arizona*	2589
$	*Washington County, Mississippi*	2590
	Rolette County, North Dakota	2591
$	*Hamilton County, Florida*	2592
$	*Bullock County, Alabama*	2593
$	*Quay County, New Mexico*	2594
$	*Quitman County, Mississippi*	2595
$	*Choctaw County, Oklahoma*	2596
$	*Franklin Parish, Louisiana*	2597
$	Yazoo County, Mississippi	2598
$	*Leflore County, Mississippi*	2599
$	*Thurston County, Nebraska*	2600
	Choctaw County, Mississippi	2601
$	*Menominee County, Wisconsin*	2602
$	*St. Francis County, Arkansas*	2602
$	*Glacier County, Montana*	2604
	Roosevelt County, Montana	2605
$	*Wilkinson County, Mississippi*	2606
$	*Coahoma County, Mississippi*	2607
	Nome Census Area, Alaska	2608
$	*Morehouse Parish, Louisiana*	2609
$	*Bennett County, South Dakota*	2610
$	*Big Horn County, Montana*	2611
	Northwest Arctic Borough, Alaska	2612
$	*Bethel Census Area, Alaska*	2613
$	*Corson County, South Dakota*	2614
$	*Madison Parish, Louisiana*	2615
$	*Todd County, South Dakota*	2616
$	*Kusilvak Census Area, Alaska*	2617

* 2,617 of 3,142 (83%) U.S. counties and county-equivalents had sufficient data to be ranked.

Note: Four states have counties in both the top 50 and bottom 50. The highest ranked and lowest ranked counties in these states are blue and red, respectively. Counties in bold black type are unusual, in that they are rural counties at the top or urban counties at the bottom. Petersburg City in Virginia is also an urban county-equivalent at the bottom.

Counties in *italics* are rural (i.e., non-metro) counties. Counties with a $ have high rates of child poverty (at or above 30%). For details on this analysis, see Methodology and Research Notes.

Best and Worst Counties, by State (ranked by the Childhood Equity Gap)

	HIGHEST RANKING COUNTY			LOWEST RANKING COUNTY			CHILDHOOD GAP‡	
	NAME		RANK*	NAME		RANK*		
Delaware	Kent		685	Sussex		1199	1.2	Small
Hawaii	Kauai		550	Hawaii		1667	1.4	
Nevada	Douglas		1041	Nye		2465	1.7	
Arizona	Santa Cruz	$	1353	Gila	$	2589	1.9	
New Hampshire	Grafton		33	Sullivan		388	1.9	
Idaho	Jefferson		288	Lemhi		2343	2.1	Moderate
Maine	Cumberland		337	Somerset		1760	2.1	
Vermont	Addison		48	Bennington		978	2.1	
Mississippi	DeSoto		570	Coahoma	$	2607	2.3	
Oklahoma	Canadian		595	Choctaw	$	2596	2.3	
South Carolina	York		434	Marlboro	$	2561	2.3	
Arkansas	Saline		757	St. Francis	$	2602	2.5	
California	Placer		135	Modoc		2156	2.6	
Connecticut	Middlesex		8	Windham		588	2.6	
Missouri	St. Charles		101	St. Louis City	$	2386	2.7	
West Virginia	Putnam		145	McDowell	$	2580	2.7	
Wyoming	Teton		185	Fremont		2273	2.7	
Michigan	Clinton		45	Lake	$	2197	2.8	
North Dakota	Grand Forks		371	Rolette		2591	2.8	
North Carolina	Union		178	Washington	$	2576	2.9	
Rhode Island	Bristol		49	Providence		1044	2.9	
Kansas	Johnson		125	Wyandotte		2472	3.0	
Massachusetts	Norfolk		19	Suffolk		812	3.0	
Pennsylvania	Bucks		37	Fayette		2176	3.0	
Indiana	Hendricks		36	Sullivan		2191	3.1	
Oregon	Benton		404	Baker		2379	3.2	
Alabama	Shelby		157	Bullock	$	2593	3.4	
Florida	St. Johns		259	Hamilton	$	2592	3.4	
Iowa	Dallas		7	Lee		1844	3.4	
Illinois	Kendall		30	Vermilion	$	2407	3.5	
Alaska	Kodiak Island		593	Kusilvak	$	2617	3.6	
Ohio	Delaware		12	Guernsey		2285	3.7	
Nebraska	Seward		89	Thurston	$	2600	3.9	
Texas	Rockwall		116	Dimmit	$	2572	4.0	Large
Colorado	Pitkin		43	Montezuma		2194	4.1	
Utah	Morgan		55	Beaver		1974	4.2	
Tennessee	Williamson		9	Shelby	$	2341	4.3	
New Mexico	Los Alamos		336	Quay	$	2594	4.4	
New York	Putnam		35	Montgomery		1948	4.4	
Montana	Gallatin		202	Big Horn	$	2611	4.7	
Georgia	Forsyth		40	Jenkins	$	2587	4.8	
Kentucky	Oldham		3	Clay	$	2519	4.8	
Washington	Whitman		293	Ferry		2529	4.9	
Louisiana	Lincoln	$	697	Madison	$	2615	5.5	
Maryland	Carroll		5	Baltimore City		2432	5.5	
Virginia	York		2	Petersburg City	$	2569	5.5	
South Dakota	Union		91	Todd	$	2616	6.2	Very Large
New Jersey	Hunterdon		1	Cumberland		1783	7.0	
Minnesota	Carver		21	Mahnomen	$	2573	7.3	
Wisconsin	Ozaukee		4	Menominee	$	2602	9.9	

1st Quartile (i.e., top 25% of counties nationally)
2nd Quartile
3rd Quartile
4th Quartile (i.e., bottom 25% of counties nationally)

Counties in *italics* are rural (i.e., non-metro) counties. Counties with a $ have high rates of child poverty (at or above 30%). For details on this analysis, see Methodology and Research Notes.

* Out of 2,617 counties and county-equivalents (e.g., parishes, boroughs) with sufficient data to be ranked

‡ The Childhood Equity Gap is given by calculating worst/best ratios for the four indicators for the counties in this table and then averaging across them. A gap of X means children in the lowest ranked county in the state are X times as likely as children in the highest ranked county to have their childhoods cut short.

Methodology and Research Notes

Every child has a right to childhood. The concept of childhood is defined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.[38] It represents a shared vision of childhood: healthy children in school and at play, growing strong and confident with the love and encouragement of their family and an extended community of caring adults, gradually taking on the responsibilities of adulthood, free from fear, safe from violence, protected from harm and exploitation. This ideal contrasts starkly with the childhood many children experience.

States differ greatly in their ability to protect childhood. The *End of Childhood State Ranking* explores this variation across states, revealing where and how children are being robbed of the childhoods they deserve. Save the Children hopes this report will stimulate discussion and action to ensure that every child fully experiences childhood.

CHILDHOOD ENDERS

The ranking does not capture the full extent of deprivations or hardships affecting children. Instead, it focuses on some key rights, or "guarantees" of childhood: life, healthy growth and development, education and protection from harm. If a child experiences all of these, his/her childhood is considered to be "intact."

The ranking tracks a series of events that, should any one of them occur, mark the end of an intact childhood. These events are called "childhood enders" and include: child dies, child is malnourished, child drops out of school, child has a child, and child is a victim of violence.

Ender events erode childhood. Depending on the number and severity of enders experienced, the loss of childhood could be complete or only partial. But once a child experiences an ender, childhood becomes fractured rather than complete. Each event represents an assault on childhood. At some point, as the assaults mount up, childhood ends.

States were ranked according to performance across this set of enders, revealing where childhood is most and least threatened.

INDICATORS, DEFINITIONS AND DATA SOURCES

The following five indicators were selected because they best represent these childhood enders, are available for all states and are regularly updated. All data were obtained from U.S. government agency sources, which are publicly available and transparent sources of information and also cited in this report. All data in this report are the most recent available as of 8 April 2020.

Infant Mortality Rate

Deaths occurring to infants under 1 year of age per 1,000 live births in 2018. The data are reported by the place of residence, not the place of death. Although adjusted for differences in age-distribution and population size, rankings by state do not take into account other state-specific population characteristics that may affect the level of mortality. When the number of deaths is small, rankings by state may be unreliable due to instability in death rates. *Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics.*

Child Food Insecurity Rate

Children under 18 living in households that experience food insecurity at some time during the year. These rates are for 2017, the latest year available for child food insecurity rates by state when this report was produced. Food insecurity is defined as limited or uncertain access to food. Food insecurity is a household-level economic and social condition of limited access to adequate food. It is distinct from hunger, an individual-level physiological condition that may result from food insecurity. *Source: Feeding America. Map the Meal Gap 2019: A Report on County and Congressional District Food Insecurity and County Food Cost in the United States in 2017.*

High School Graduation Rate

Public high school 4-year adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) for the United States and all 50 states during school year 2016-17. The 4-year ACGR is the number of students who graduate in 4 years with a regular high school diploma divided by the number of students who form the adjusted cohort for the graduating class. From the beginning of high school, students who are entering that grade for the first time form a cohort that is "adjusted" by adding any students who subsequently transfer into the cohort and subtracting any students who subsequently transfer out, emigrate to another country or die. This rate was subtracted from 100% to give the share of children not graduating from high school on time. *Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics.*

Teen Birth Rate

Babies born to adolescents living in the United States aged 15 through 19 per 1,000 females in 2018. Data reflect the mother's place of residence, rather than the place of birth.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics.

Child Homicide and Suicide Rate

Violence-related injury deaths include homicides and suicides to children from birth through age 19 per 100,000 children in 2018. It is important to note that several measures were regarded as "unreliable" or "suppressed" by the CDC because of the low number of deaths used to compute the rate. Counts below 10, which belonged to Hawaii, Rhode Island and Vermont, were suppressed and counts below 20, which belonged to Maine, New Hampshire, North Dakota and Wyoming, were noted as "unreliable." *Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control.*

CALCULATIONS

For each childhood ender, a ranking of states was calculated. States with a higher ranking (closer to number 1) have better results on that childhood indicator. An average rank for each state based on all five indicators was calculated by adding each of the five indicator ranks together and dividing by five:

STEP 1: Rank1 + Rank2 + Rank3 + Rank4 + Rank5 = Rank Sum
STEP 2: Rank Sum/5 = Average Rank

States were then re-ranked from 1 to 50 based on this average rank.

Three states (Hawaii, Rhode Island and Vermont) had child homicide and suicide data suppressed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention due to extremely small frequency counts. To account for these missing data, the states were given a ranking of 1 on the child is a victim of violence ender. Because these states had extremely low numbers of homicides and suicides, it was determined that the most appropriate approach to addressing the suppressed data was to estimate that their calculated homicide and suicide rates would also be very low, yielding a ranking of 1 for this indicator.

TECHNICAL NOTE ON THE 2020 COUNTY RANKING

The methodology for the *End of Childhood County Ranking* mirrored the *End of Childhood State Ranking*, with one exception: it included four instead of five indicators. Because infant deaths and child homicides and suicides are relatively rare occurrences, death rates were unavailable or unreliable for most counties. So the child death rate, which includes deaths to children under age 18 from all causes, was used instead. To ensure a sufficient number of counties had mortality data, 5-year estimates were used for as many counties as possible; where 5-year estimates were not available (20% of counties ranked), 10-year estimates were used.

The other three indicators (child food insecurity, high school graduation and teen births) are the same as the state ranking. Indicator definitions, years and sources are given in the table below. Child poverty rates at the county level were analyzed but were not factored into the ranking.

Counties had to have data for all four indicators to be included in the ranking. In total, 2,617 of 3,142 (83%) U.S. counties and county-equivalents had sufficient data to be ranked.

The highest and lowest ranked counties in each state were identified. For each set of counties, worst/best ratios for all four indicators were calculated and then averaged to give the Childhood Equity Gap. Gaps were categorized as follows: < 2 = small, 2-4 = moderate, 4-6 = large and ≥ 6 = very large.

The highest ranked county in each state on each indicator was also identified. To estimate the number of childhoods that would be saved by closing state-wide equity gaps, the number of child deaths, teen births and food-insecure children was compared to the number of deaths, births, etc. that would have occurred in each state and nationwide had each state performed as well as its highest ranked county on each of these indicators.

County Indicators

Measure	Definition	Data Source	Year(s) of Data
Child Mortality	Number of deaths among children under age 18 per 100,000 population	CDC WONDER mortality data	2014-2018 (80%); 2009-2018 (20%)
Child Food Insecurity	Percentage of children (aged 0-18) who lack adequate access to food	Map the Meal Gap[39]	2017
High School Graduation	Percentage of ninth-grade cohort that graduates in four years	County Health Rankings and Roadmaps[40]	Varies (2016-2018)
Teen Births	Number of births per 1,000 females aged 15-19	National Center for Health Statistics	2018
Child Poverty	Percentage of children (aged 0-18) living in poverty	U.S. Census Bureau, Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE) Program	2018

ENDNOTES

[1] 78% of counties in the bottom of the county ranking (508 of 654) have child poverty rates at or above 25%. 73% of counties in the bottom quarter are rural (480 of 654). 60% (390 of 654) are both poor and rural.

[2] In 88% of U.S. county and county-equivalents (2751 of 3142) a majority (over half) of the population is non-Hispanic white. Only 3% of counties are majority black (97 of 3142) and less than 1% of counties are majority Native American (28 of 3142). But among the 50 lowest ranked counties, 15 are majority black, 14 are majority Native American, 13 are majority white and 2 are majority Hispanic. And in the 6 counties where there is no racial majority, Native Americans constitute the largest share of the population in one, African Americans in two and Caucasians in three. Source: Save the Children's analysis of demographic data provided by University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute. *County Health Rankings & Roadmaps 2020*. <www.countyhealthrankings.org>

[3] Adults make up most of the known COVID-19 cases to date. When children do get sick, they generally have mild symptoms. It is rare for children to be so sick that they need to go to the hospital due to COVID-19. Sources: Johns Hopkins Medicine, *Coronavirus in Babies and Children* <hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/coronavirus-in-babies-and-children> and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *COVID-19 and Children* <www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html> both accessed April 22, 2020

[4] The majority of children who needed hospitalization for COVID-19 had at least one underlying medical condition. The most common underlying conditions reported among children with COVID-19 include chronic lung disease (including asthma), heart disease and conditions that weaken the immune system. This information suggests that children with these underlying medical conditions may be at risk for more severe illness from COVID-19. There is much more to be learned about how the disease impacts children. Sources: Johns Hopkins Medicine, *Coronavirus in Babies and Children* <hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/coronavirus-in-babies-and-children> and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *COVID-19 and Children* <www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html> both accessed April 22, 2020

[5] The Brookings Institution. *What the Coronavirus Reveals About the Digital Divide Between Schools and Communities*. March 17, 2020 <www.brookings.edu/blog/techtank/2020/03/17/what-the-coronavirus-reveals-about-the-digital-divide-between-schools-and-communities/>

[6] Save the Children. *COVID-19: 2 in 3 Parents in the U.S. Worry about Their Child's Emotional & Mental Well-Being*. Press Release. April 10, 2020

[7] USDA, Economic Research Service < www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/child-nutrition-programs/national-school-lunch-program/>

[8] As of late April, food banks across the U.S. were reporting a 70% increase in need. Source: Feeding America <feedingamerica.org/hunger-blog/want-help-food-banks-during-pandemic-heres-how> Accessed April 22, 2020. See also Sell, et al. *The Effect of Recession on Child Well-Being: A Synthesis of the Evidence by PolicyLab, The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia*. (2010)

[9] FBI National Press Office <www.fbi.gov/news/pressrel/press-releases/school-closings-due-to-covid-19-present-potential-for-increased-risk-of-child-exploitation>; PBS NEWS HOUR <www.pbs.org/newshour/health/why-child-welfare-experts-fear-a-spike-of-abuse-during-covid-19>; NPR <www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/28/847251985/child-sexual-abuse-reports-are-on-the-rise-amid-lockdown-orders>; First Focus. *The Effect of the Great Recession on Child Well-Being: A Synthesis of the Evidence by PolicyLab at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia*. (2015)

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[11] J. McFarland, J. Cui, J. Holmes and X. Wang. *Trends in High School Dropout and Completion Rates in the United States: 2019* (NCES 2020-117). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics: Washington, DC: 2019

[12] Alisha Coleman-Jensen, Matthew P. Rabbitt, Christian A. Gregory and Anita Singh. *Household Food Security in the United States in 2018*. (USDA, Economic Research Service: 2019)

[13] J.A. Martin, B.E. Hamilton, M.J.K. Osterman and A.K. Driscoll. *Births:* "Final Data for 2018." *National Vital Statistics Reports*. Vol. 68, No 13. Table 3. National Center for Health Statistics: Hyattsville, MD: 2019

[14] J.Q. Xu, S.L. Murphy, K.D. Kochanek and E. Arias. "Mortality in the United States, 2018." NCHS Data Brief. No. 355. National Center for Health Statistics: Hyattsville, MD: 2020

[15] Save the Children. *U.S. Complement to the End of Childhood Report 2018: Growing Up Rural in America*.

[16] "High poverty" counties are defined as those with child poverty rates at or above 30%. "Rural" counties are defined as nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) counties, as categorized by the Office of Management and Budget. Nonmetro counties are located outside the boundaries of metropolitan (metro) areas and are widely used to study conditions in "rural" America. For details, see the USDA: <www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/rural-classifications/>

[17] Analysis included the 100 counties with the highest rates on each indicator. For example, the counties where the most children struggle with hunger are the 100 counties with the highest child food insecurity rates in the nation.

[18] 29 of the 50 (58%) bottom-ranked counties on the county ranking have high levels of vulnerability (i.e., SVI scores of 0.9 or more) and 35 of the 50 (70%) top-ranked counties on the county ranking have low levels of vulnerability (i.e., SVI scores of 0.1 or lower). Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention/ Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry/ Geospatial Research, Analysis, and Services Program. *Social Vulnerability Index 2018 Database*. Accessed on April 8, 2020

[19] The overall equity analysis looks at all counties in each state to see how tightly they cluster or, conversely, how spread out they are, as given by the standard deviation (SD) of their ranks. States with counties that are more tightly clustered (i.e., that have smaller SDs and more similar ranks) are more equal, and states where county ranks are more dispersed or spread out (i.e., that have larger SDs and are more dissimilar) are less equal. The childhood gap analysis, by comparison, compares "ender" rates in just the overall best and worst county in the state. Although states that do well on one analysis tend to do well on the other, there are notable exceptions. Wisconsin, Minnesota and New Jersey – the three states with the largest childhood gaps – are all above-average in terms of overall equity. The best and/or worst counties in these states are outliers and drive up the childhood gap.

[20] These states rank among the bottom 10 overall on the state ranking but place among the 10 states with the smallest Childhood Equity Gaps.

[21] These states rank among the bottom 10 overall on the state ranking but place among the 10 states with the largest Childhood Equity Gaps.

[22] A.L. Pereira, S. Handa and G. Holmqvist. "Prevalence and Correlates of Food Insecurity Among Children Across the Globe," Innocenti Working Paper 2017-09. (UNICEF Office of Research: Florence: 2017)

[23] The child death rate (ages 0-17) in Jackson County (SD) is 236 per 100,000. Death rates for children aged 0-14 in Cambodia and Iraq are 235 and 245 per 100,000, respectively. Calculations by Save the Children using 2018 mortality estimates from UN IGME (*UN IGME Total 5-14 Mortality Database 2019*) and 2018 population data from UN DESA (*World Population Prospects 2019*).

[24] Teen birth rates in these Texas counties range from 69 to 72 per 1,000. Teen birth rates in other countries are sourced from: The World Bank. *Adolescent Fertility Rate* <data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.ADO.TFRT> Accessed April 21, 2020

[25] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention/ Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry/ Geospatial Research, Analysis, and Services Program. *Social Vulnerability Index 2018 Database*. Accessed on April 8, 2020

[26] Estimates of per capita state spending on children were sourced from: The Urban Institute. *Unequal Playing Field? State Differences in Spending on Children in 2013*. (Washington, DC, 2017). Estimates include local spending on education but do not include federal spending in states through programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, the federal earned income tax credit, the national school lunch program, and so on, or the federal share of joint programs such as Medicaid, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and foster care.

[27] These states place in the bottom 15 on both rankings. Although children tend to have better outcomes in states that spend more on them, and vice versa, there are notable exceptions. Alaska, for example, is among the top 5 biggest spenders on children, yet it ranks in the bottom 10 on the state ranking. So while money matters, public spending is just one of many factors affecting child outcomes.

[28] Children's Defense Fund. *Legislative Report Card*. January 2020. <cdfactioncouncil.org/reportcard>

[29] In other words, states that perform well on the state ranking tend to elect people that care about and prioritize children's issues. The relationship noted here is not necessarily causal. Although Members of Congress have some influence on money going to their state from the federal government, they don't control local- or state-level investments in children.

[30] Seven of the top 10 states on the state ranking (Connecticut, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Rhode Island and Vermont) have an A grade on average, while seven of the bottom 10 states on the state ranking (Alabama, Alaska, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Oklahoma and South Carolina) have a C grade on average. Average legislative grades for each state were calculated by assigning points to each legislator's grade (A=5, B=4, C=3, D=2, F=1) and then averaging across all legislators in that state. Average scores were rounded to the nearest whole number.

[31] University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute. County Health Rankings & Roadmaps 2020. <countyhealthrankings.org

[32] Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger. <www.endhungerco.org/interactive-map> Accessed April 22, 2020)

[33] Jorge Luis García, James J. Heckman, Duncan Ermini Leaf and María José Prados. Quantifying the Life-cycle Benefits of a Prototypical Early Childhood Program." NBER Working Paper No. 23479. June 2017, revised February 2019

[34] Rasheed Malik, Katie Hamm, Leila Schochet, Cristina Novoa, Simon Workman and Steven Jessen-Howard. *America's Child Care Deserts in 2018*. Center for American Progress. December 6, 2018

[35] Committee for Economic Development of The Conference Board and RegionTrack, Inc. *Child Care in State Economies: 2019 Update.*

[36] National Association for the Education of Young Children. *From the Front Lines The Ongoing Effect of the Pandemic on Child Care*. April 17, 2020

[37] Save the Children Action Network. *Survey: Vast Majority of Voters Support Financial Assistance for America's Child Care Industry to Address COVID-19 Impact.* April 22, 2020

[38] Childhood means more than just the time between birth and adulthood. It refers to the state and condition of a child's life – to the quality of those years. As the most widely endorsed human rights treaty in history, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989 and ratified by all but one country, represents a global consensus on the terms of childhood. Although there is not absolute agreement on the interpretation of each and every provision of the Convention, there is substantial common ground on what the standards of childhood should be. Source: UNICEF. *The State of the World's Children 2005*

[39] C. Gundersen, A. Dewey, M. Kato, A. Crumbaugh and M. Strayer. *Map the Meal Gap 2019: A Report on County and Congressional District Food Insecurity and County Food Cost in the United States in 2017.* (Feeding America: 2019)

[40] University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute. *County Health Rankings & Roadmaps 2020*. <www.countyhealthrankings.org>

Dezirae, age 4, and Harmony, age 3, play with clay in a day care center in Texas.

Photo: Ellery Lamm / Save the Children

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Save the Children believes every child deserves a future. Since our founding over 100 years ago, we've changed the lives of over 1 billion children. In the United States and around the world, we give children a healthy start in life, the opportunity to learn and protection from harm. We do whatever it takes for children – every day and in times of crisis – transforming their lives and the future we share.

ON THE COVER
Jonah, age 6, during a Save the Children reading program at his school in Tennessee.

Photo: Shawn Millsaps / Save the Children