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New report shows Montana families with children struggling during COVID crisis; food security and health care greatest concerns

Montana is falling short on food security and health care for families, according to *Kids, Families and COVID-19: Pandemic Pain Points and a Roadmap for Recovery*, a 50-state report of recent household data developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation analyzing how families are faring during the COVID-19 crisis.

“The data shows what we already suspected – Montana families are struggling to meet basic needs like enough food to eat and a place to live,” said Xanna Burg, KIDS COUNT Coordinator with the Montana Budget & Policy Center, Montana’s member of the KIDS COUNT network.

This KIDS COUNT report examined data from weekly surveys conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau that demonstrate how families across the country are challenged to meet basic needs during this global public health crisis while managing school, work, and mental health. The Foundation finds that the concurrent health and economic crises are exacerbating trends that show vulnerable families are unable to fulfill basic needs. The report can be found at <https://www.aecf.org/resources/kids-families-and-covid-19/>.

Report findings for Montana include:

- **Housing:** Nearly one in seven families are worried they won’t be able to make their next rent or mortgage payment on time. Without needed housing support and protections, these families are at risk for eviction, foreclosure, or becoming even further behind on payments.
- **Food Security:** One in seven adults reported their family sometimes or often did not have enough to eat during the most recent week. The KIDS COUNT report highlights that school closures may have impacted child hunger, where more than 64,000 Montana children eat free or reduced-price lunches at school each day.
- **Health Care:** One in ten families with children are going without health insurance. While there are no current estimates for the share of children without health coverage, Montana did see an increase in uninsured children prior to the start of the pandemic.
- **Mental Health:** One in five people in households with children reported feeling down, depressed, or hopeless in the last week.

“When families cannot afford rent, health care, or food to eat, they are faced with impossible decisions on how to prioritize their children’s most basic needs,” said Burg. “Montana children and families need state and national policymakers to act now to ensure children have what they need to thrive during this challenging time.”

Montana KIDS COUNT recommends Montana policymakers continue to support Medicaid Expansion, which provides health coverage to nearly 90,000 adults. A recent report by the Montana Budget & Policy Center shows that despite representing 12 percent of the workforce, workers on Medicaid expansion accounted for 19 percent of the unemployment claims filed in the peak week of April 18. At the height of the unemployment crisis, 18,700 were simultaneously on Medicaid Expansion and unemployment insurance. The vast majority of these workers – 82 percent – had been employed prior to March and had not been receiving unemployment insurance.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation urges policymakers to put COVID-19 response at the top of policy agendas. The Foundation calls on elected officials and other decision makers to:

- ***Put racial and ethnic equity first in policymaking*** by using disaggregated data and engaging community stakeholders. This should ensure that the policymaking process is informed by the diverse perspectives of those hardest hit by the crisis and created in partnership with communities. This approach should underpin any concrete policy actions.
- ***Prioritize the physical and mental health of all children*** by guaranteeing that any vaccine will be available without cost as a factor and by retaining and strengthening the Affordable Care Act. To promote mental health, policymakers should work to reduce the student-to-school-counselor ratio in all school settings to levels recommended by mental health professionals.
- ***Help families with children achieve financial stability and bolster their well-being*** by expanding access to unemployment insurance and by expanding child care access. Additionally, policymakers should eliminate barriers to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and the Child Tax Credit (CTC). And beyond any temporary housing assistance programs aimed at heading off a foreclosure or eviction crisis, federal policymakers should expand the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher program and increase the overall availability of public housing.
- ***Ensure schools are better funded, more equitably funded and ready to meet the needs of students disparately affected by the pandemic*** by boosting school funding to protect against the economic impact of the pandemic, build maintenance-of-equity requirements into relief packages and address disparities in technology access at home and in the classroom.

About Montana KIDS COUNT

Montana KIDS COUNT is a leading resource for data on child and family well-being in the state and is dedicated to providing current, relevant, and reliable data to shape the issues affecting Montana children and families. More information can be found at montanakidscount.org/. Montana KIDS COUNT is a project of the Montana Budget & Policy Center, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization providing in-depth research and analysis on budget, tax, and economic issues. More information can be found at www.montanabudget.org.

About the Annie E. Casey Foundation

The Annie E. Casey Foundation creates a brighter future for the nation's children by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling communities into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow. For more information, visit www.aecf.org. *KIDS COUNT*® is a registered trademark of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Journalists interested in creating maps, graphs and rankings in stories about the *Kids Count* report can use the KIDS COUNT Data Center at datacenter.kidscount.org.

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