



A DECADE OF STALLED PROGRESS

*OPPORTUNITY STUNTED
FOR CHILDREN IN CHESTER COUNTY*



*A Children First
Report on Chester County*

February 2025

children
FIRST
THE ADVOCATE FOR KIDS

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Introduction

Chester County is home to approximately 119,000 children.¹ Fortunately, most of these children are being raised in homes that offer them tremendous opportunities and they live in communities and attend schools that boost their prospects. Yet three out of ten children are much less fortunate, living in families that can't afford to meet their needs without going into debt or going without essentials.² These children mostly live in communities where the schools have insufficient funds to ensure the success of their students. In addition, the resources to meet the health care, early learning, and family supports are far short of what is needed to help at least 22,000 children in Chester County achieve their full potential.³ These children are concentrated in a handful of communities that require a renewed effort to give every child in the county the great childhoods they deserve.

Unfortunately, the data shows that prospects for opportunity and economic mobility for children from low-wealth families stagnated in the last ten years with the exception of their racial and ethnic makeup.

ECONOMIC FAST FACTS FOR CHESTER COUNTY

22,000 children live in families earning too little to meet their needs

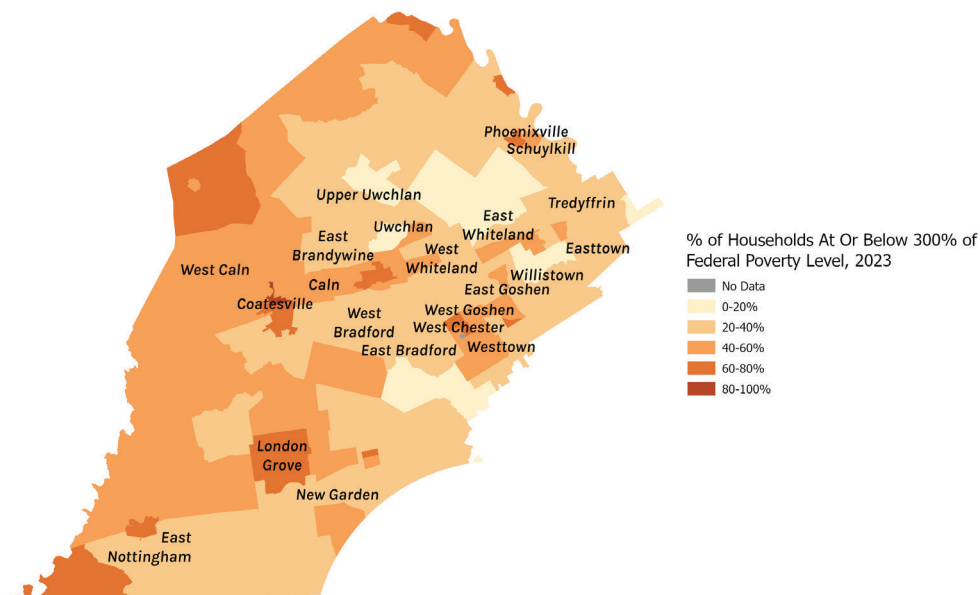
29% of all families with children are earning less than needed

Families with two children need to earn \$91,548 or much more if they have child care costs

8% of families report being food insecure

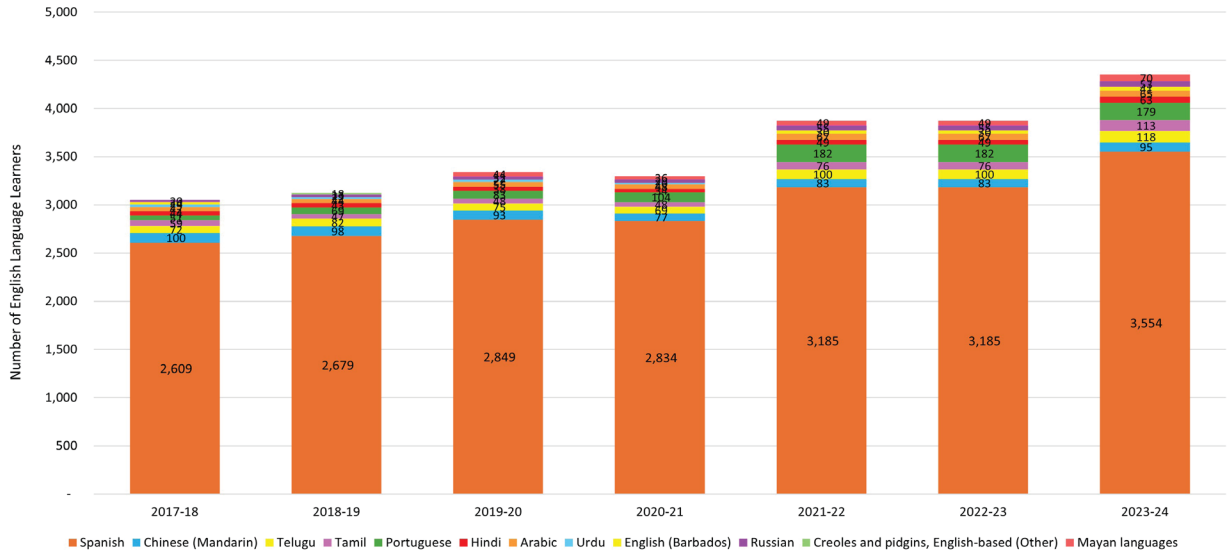
Families earning the least gained \$2,457 of purchasing power in the last decade

20% More Families are Struggling to Make Ends Meet in Most Communities Across Chester County⁴



Chester County’s children are more diverse today than they were ten years ago as the number of children of color increased by 7,632 – a 23% increase – since 2014.⁵ About 31% of children are non-white compared to roughly 26% a decade ago. Although many cultural and ethnic communities are increasingly calling Chester County home, Asian children account for the fastest growing number of newcomers.

The Cultural Heritage of Children in Chester County Became More Diverse from 2017-2018 to 2023-2024⁶



Chester County is notably the only county in southeastern Pennsylvania to see a greater increase in the number of Asian children than Hispanic children in the past decade.⁷ The number of Asian children increased by roughly 4,000 compared to roughly 1,900 Hispanic children. Despite this, children whose first language is Spanish outnumbered ever other English language learner in Chester County’s public schools three to one in 2024.⁸

Often large demographic categories obscure the diverse cultural heritages included in them. Both the Asian and Hispanic children in Chester County come from a variety of heritages based on their parents’ country of origin and ethnicity. For example, Asian children in Chester County hail from a plethora of ethnicities including Han Chinese, Telugu, Tamil, and the many ethnic groups that make up the Indo-Aryan people of India and Pakistan. The increasing diversity in the county requires greater cultural competence among child serving institutions for children to succeed.

The Official Poverty Measure Masks Real Economic Hardship

Too many families of all races and ethnicities are facing economic hardship in the county. The method used by the U.S. Census Bureau to measure poverty, while useful, is not robust enough to fully describe the relationship between the income earned by a household and the cost of living for that household.

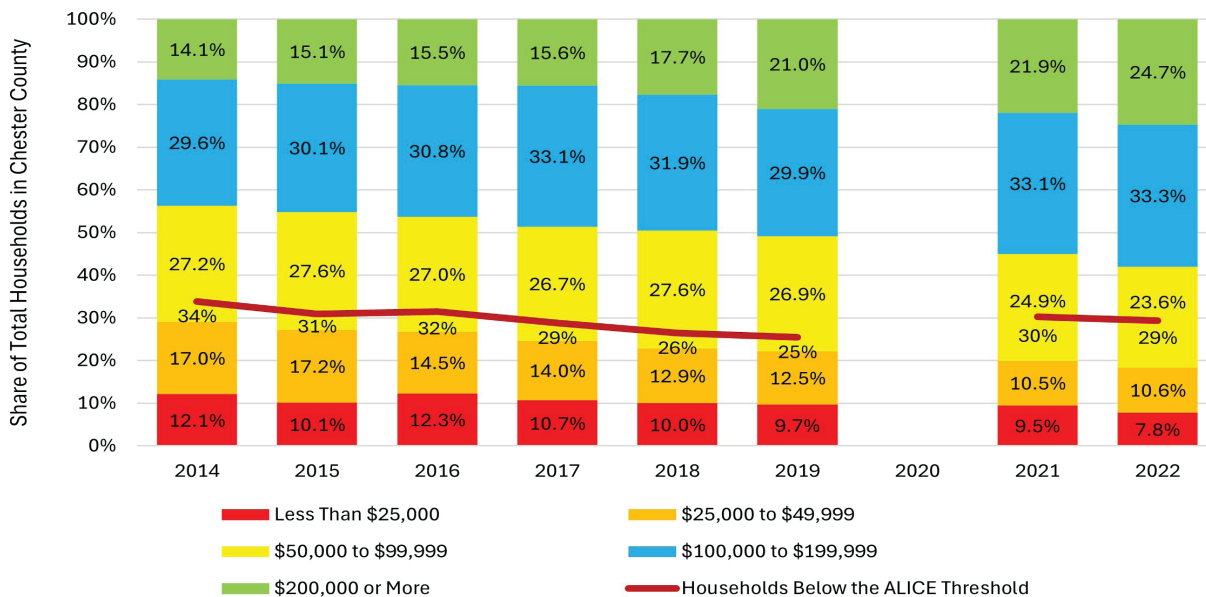
Therefore, a collaboration among several United Way organizations across the country developed the ALICE Household Survival Budget, which calculates the minimum cost of household basics (housing, child care, food, transportation, health care, technology, and taxes) for every county in the country.⁹

These budgets — tailored by the number and age of household members — are compared to household income from the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey to estimate the number and share of households living below the ALICE Threshold at the county level.¹⁰

This robust ALICE measure finds that a family of two adults and two children would need to make \$91,548, or almost three times more than the official federal poverty measure, to afford the basics of rent, food, transportation, health insurance, and other essentials.¹¹ If the family needs child care so the parents can work, their earnings would need to rise to \$115,728.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■
The average family of four in Chester County would need to make \$91,548 to afford the basics.
■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

Nearly 30% of Families with Children are Below the ALICE Threshold in Chester County¹²



Until the COVID pandemic, the share of children living in families earning too little to meet their needs trended downward, reaching a low of 25% in 2019.¹³ In the wake of supply shortages and inflation following the pandemic, however, 29% of families found themselves short of what is needed to support their children based on the latest data from 2022. It is not a surprise that the share of families reporting food insecurity increased between 2021 to 2022 from 4% to 8%, the first increase since 2017.¹⁴

Families are increasingly turning to public benefits to meet their basic needs. Approximately 13,677 children relied on SNAP benefits to avoid hunger in 2024, up 25% since 2019.¹⁵ Similarly, the number of children benefitting from WIC was at a five-year high of 3,179 in 2024.¹⁶

Chester County's enrollment in these public benefits is below every other county in southeastern Pennsylvania. Despite this, Chester County has the second highest number of homeless children in the region. Since 2015, the number of homeless children in Chester County tripled, reaching a high of 1,702 in the 2024 school year in a period of ostensibly robust income growth in the county.¹⁷ This number is likely a low estimate, given the many workarounds caregivers use to avoid shelters or living on the street, like couch surfing or short-term stays with family or friends.¹⁸

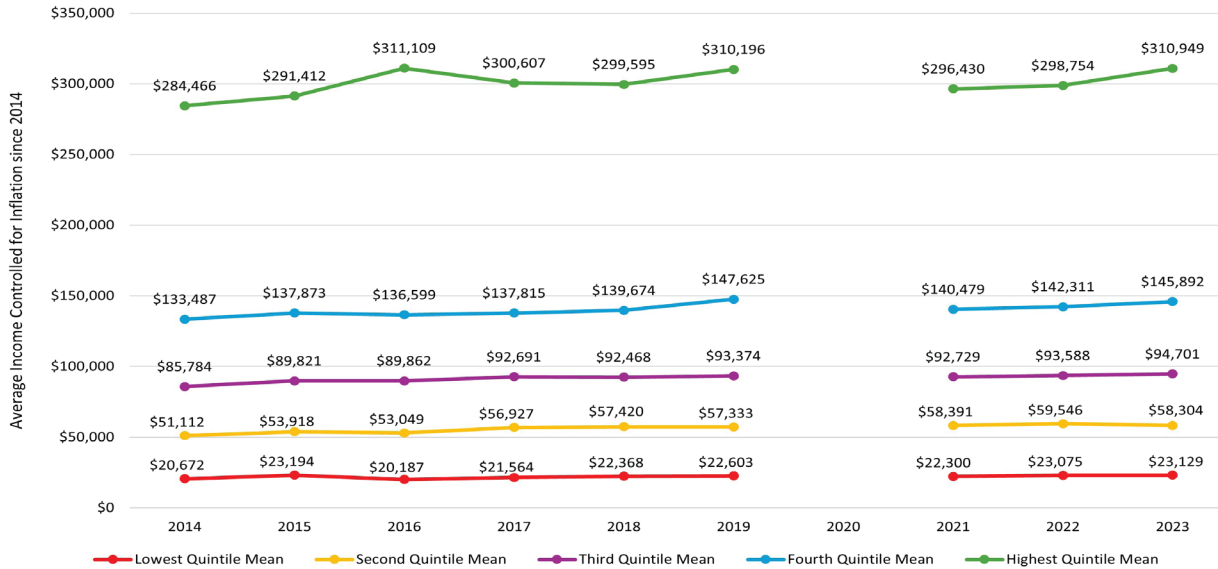
Wage Growth Fails to Outpace Inflation

The shockingly high and stubborn number of children living in struggling families, and rising hunger and homelessness rates stand in stark contrast to the overall income distribution trends in the county. In the last decade, more households earned over \$50,000 (up from 71% to 82%) and the number of households earning over \$200,000 a year increased from 14% to 25%.¹⁹

Although most Chester County working adults earned more over the decade, financial boosts typically were diminished due to rapidly increasing costs for basic goods and services. After accounting for inflation, the average Chester County household experienced a \$8,917 increase in purchasing power in the last decade despite wage growth increasing by nearly \$38,000.²⁰

Increases in earnings were also inequitably distributed across socioeconomic groups, adding to the economic disparity in the county. The poorest 20% of county residents experienced a \$2,457 increase in their annual purchasing power in the last decade despite wage growth compared to the next 20% income group which saw a \$7,192 boost in purchasing power.²¹ The top 20%, by contrast, saw their purchasing power grow by a staggering \$26,483 in the same period.

Income Growth Continues to be Inequitably Distributed in Chester County²²



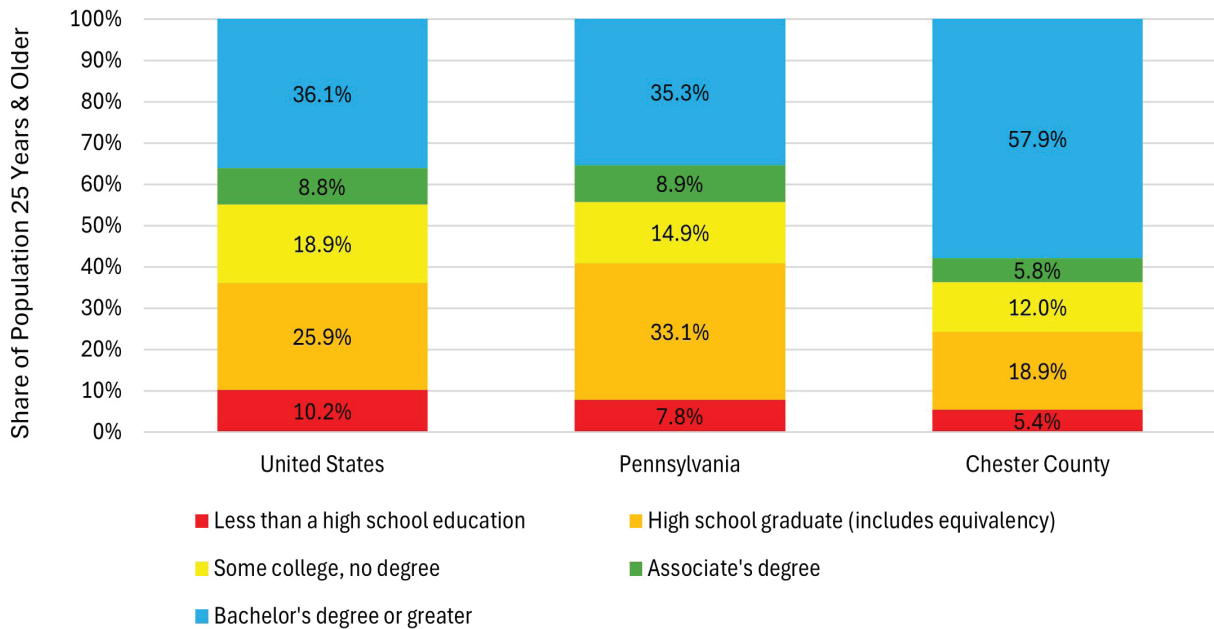
The poorest 20% in Chester County are notable for being the only lowest income group across the southeastern counties to see purchasing power rise above \$700. Unfortunately, the share of children living in economically stressed households has fallen very little in the last decade even while the nation experienced a strong and sustained period of economic growth. The policy strategies in place are clearly insufficient to ensure low-wealth caregivers can increase their earning capacity and thereby make the lives of their children demonstrably better.

Educational Attainment Challenges Hold Back Economic Prospects

National data demonstrates that adults can substantially boost their earnings capacity if they have some post-secondary training or education.²³ For Chester County families, the impact of education is even stronger than the national trend. For families where at least one adult completed some college, their earnings were 42% higher than households where at least one adult had only a just a high school diploma.²⁴ Where a caregiver had a four-year degree, their earning capacity rose by more than 63% compared to households where at least one caregiver lacked a diploma.

Fortunately, more Chester County children are likely to be raised by a parent with at least some college or post-secondary education compared to ten years ago. Nearly 76% of Chester County adults now have some post high school education or training compared to 69% ten years ago.²⁵ That is almost 49,000 more adults with at least some form of a post-secondary education. Similarly promising, the number of adults with a high school degree rose by roughly 41,000 in the decade.

The Share of Chester County Adults with Undergraduate or Post-Graduate Degrees is Higher than the National Share ²⁶



Most promising is the increase of adults with four or more years of college, up by nine percentage points, or 50,000 more adults in the decade.²⁷

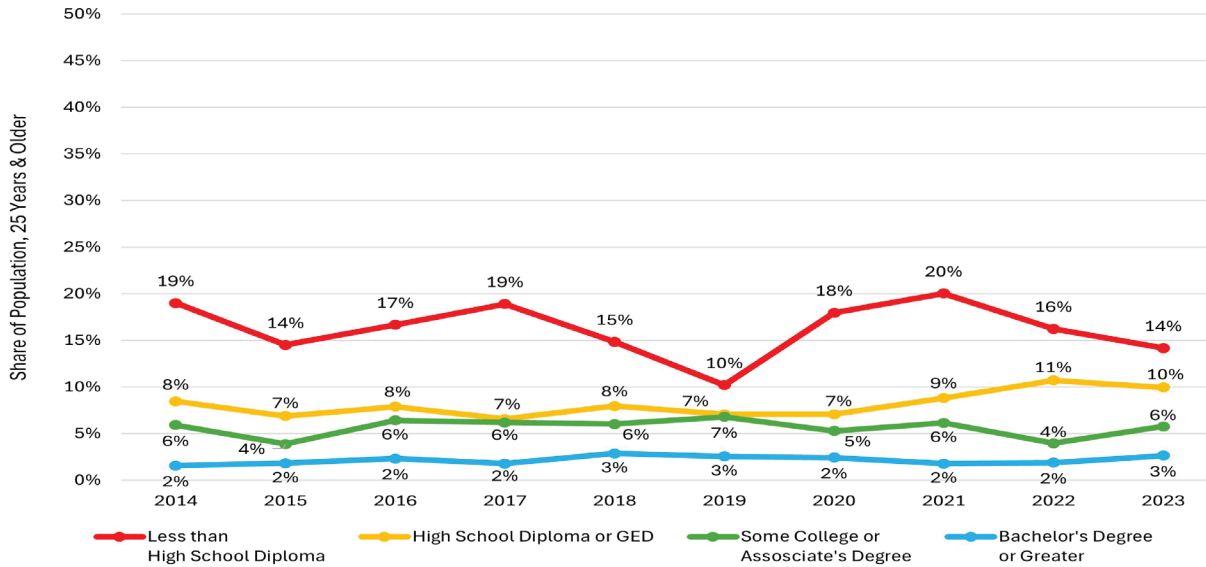
As of 2023, Chester County adults were more likely to have a college education than all adults across the state and the nation.²⁸ This positive trend may explain the jump in the average median income from approximately \$85,000 to \$121,000 from 2014 to 2023.²⁹

Given the rising demands of the labor market, which is increasingly rewarding job seekers with some college, too many adults with just a high school diploma or less are in poverty. This data suggests that real barriers to secondary and post-secondary education pathways persist, limiting the capacity of more than 9,800 adults in Chester County to rise into the middle class based on the latest data from 2023.³⁰

For every person with a high school diploma or less, there are three people with at least some form of a post-secondary education in Chester County, available to fulfill the increasing demands of the labor market. This may explain why the county’s unemployment rate has trended consistently lower than the state and federal unemployment rates for the past decade, even in the fallout of the pandemic.³¹

More children are likely to be raised by a parent with at least some college or post-secondary education compared to ten years ago.

Some College Attendance Cuts Chances of Living in Poverty in Chester County by 42%³²



Likewise, the county’s poverty rate for all adults has consistently held below the adult poverty rate for the overall state. Despite this, the child poverty rate in Chester County is greater than the poverty rate for all adults, mirroring the similar conditions in its neighboring counties and the state. Based on the latest available data from 2023, roughly 7% of the county’s children lived in poverty compared to 6% of all adults.³³

Volatility of Federal Tax Policy Hurts Families

Research consistently shows that a significant portion of children’s well-being is directly linked to their family’s economic status. Children living in poverty are more likely to experience hunger, housing insecurity, and poor health outcomes, and are more likely to attend low-performing schools, drop out of high school, and experience poverty as an adult.

Government policies like paid family and medical leave, the child tax credit and the child and dependent care tax credit, provide families with much needed financial support. Paid family leave allows parents to provide better care during a child’s critical early developmental stages, leading to improved health.

The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 temporarily expanded the Child Tax Credit for the 2021 tax year to \$3,600 per child younger than age six and \$3,000 per child up to age 17.



The enhanced Child Tax Credit reduced child poverty by 46% in Pennsylvania in 2021.



This temporary expanded and refundable child tax credit, issued during the pandemic, significantly reduced child poverty by 43% nationwide.³⁴

In Pennsylvania, the impact was even greater, with child poverty rates reduced by 46%.³⁵ In Chester County, families across the board benefited from \$157 million through this refundable tax policy.³⁶ Chester County families also benefited from \$18 million in savings through the refundable child and dependent care tax credit policy. Survey research shows that families spent most funds on food, clothing, and school supplies.³⁷

Unfortunately, both expanded tax policies expired, robbing tens of thousands of children the life-changing impacts of increased economic security. Recently, statewide efforts tried to offset these impacts by nearly tripling the state-level Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit, which will benefit 13,730 Chester County families.³⁸

In addition to the decade-long barriers to upward mobility for the lowest income families in the county, and the downward trends in educational attainment and health care access for children demonstrate that public policies are failing to produce the opportunity families need to help their children thrive and enter adulthood prepared for success.

Early Childhood Education

High-quality and affordable child care is critical to boosting the economic conditions in low-wealth households by enabling caregivers to work. Families languish on waitlists for child care, while early childhood providers struggle to find enough qualified staff to open up classrooms. In addition, Pennsylvania loses \$6.65 billion annually because of breakdowns in the sector.³⁹ This dysfunction in the child care sector has serious implications for Chester County's economy.

Policies to Support New Parents are Absent

As parents are welcoming a newborn baby, they shouldn't be forced to choose between bonding with their child or going back to work. Paid family leave allows parents to provide better care during a child's critical early developmental stages, which leads to improved health. Statewide, 66% of businesses in Pennsylvania do not offer their employees paid family and medical leave. In 2022, 3,697 Chester County newborns went home to parents who did not have access to paid leave, forcing thousands of families to give up their hard-earned savings and risk poverty.⁴⁰ A simple policy solution could provide parents with insurance so they can take care of their children and their bills.

Child Care: Affordability, Supply & Quality Challenges Persist

With the pandemic in the rearview mirror, many experts, understandably, were concerned that the child care sector would struggle to rebound with the expiration of federal pandemic aid. Indeed, trends over the last ten years show that costs have continued to increase, capacity has been reduced, and access and enrollment in high-quality programs continues to be a challenge. Additionally, without high-quality care, children are unable to access the life-changing benefits of early childhood education.

This section looks at three aspects of the child care sector: cost, supply, and quality.

CHILD CARE & PRE-K FAST FACTS FOR CHESTER COUNTY

28,752 children under the age of 5 years old

3,770 children eligible for Child Care Works (child care subsidy)

74% of eligible children are NOT enrolled in Child Care Works

Nearly 24% of child care providers are high-quality but they serve nearly half of eligible children (57%)

3,680 children are eligible for high-quality publicly funded pre-k

65% of eligible children are NOT enrolled in publicly funded pre-k

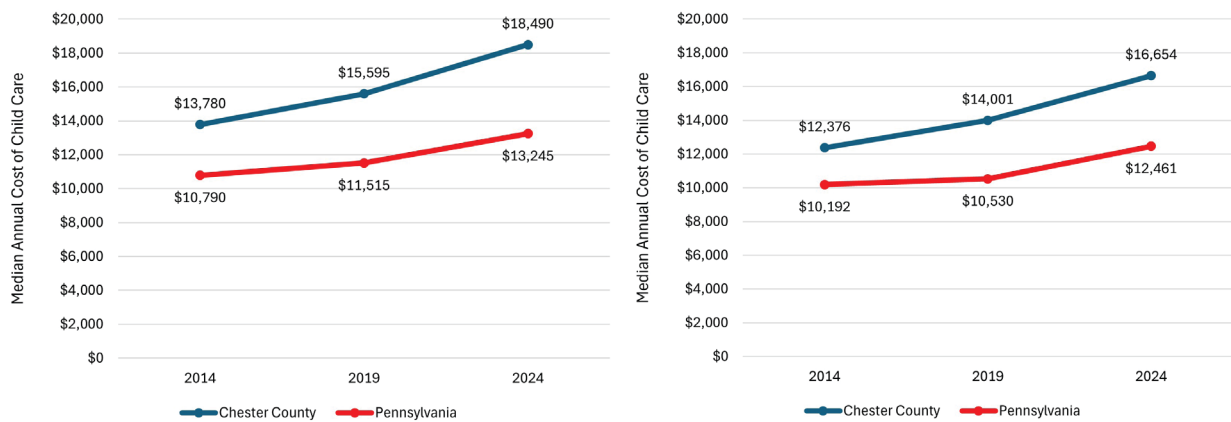
109 unfilled staff positions in child care programs

712 children could be served if child care programs were fully staffed

Without Help, Families Really Struggle to Cover Costs

Chester County is home to 28,752 children under the age of five, and their parents face steep costs when it comes to early education and care.⁴¹ County residents pay \$5,245 more for infant care than the rest of Pennsylvania; toddler care costs \$4,193 more.⁴² Little progress has been made to bring those costs down. In fact, infant care costs in Chester County increased by 34% and toddler care rose by 35% from 2013 to 2024. In 2024, the average family spent 15% of their household budget on infant care, more than twice the federal recommendation of 7%.⁴³

The Median Annual Cost of Infant or Toddler Child Care is More Expensive in Chester County than the Average Statewide Cost⁴⁴



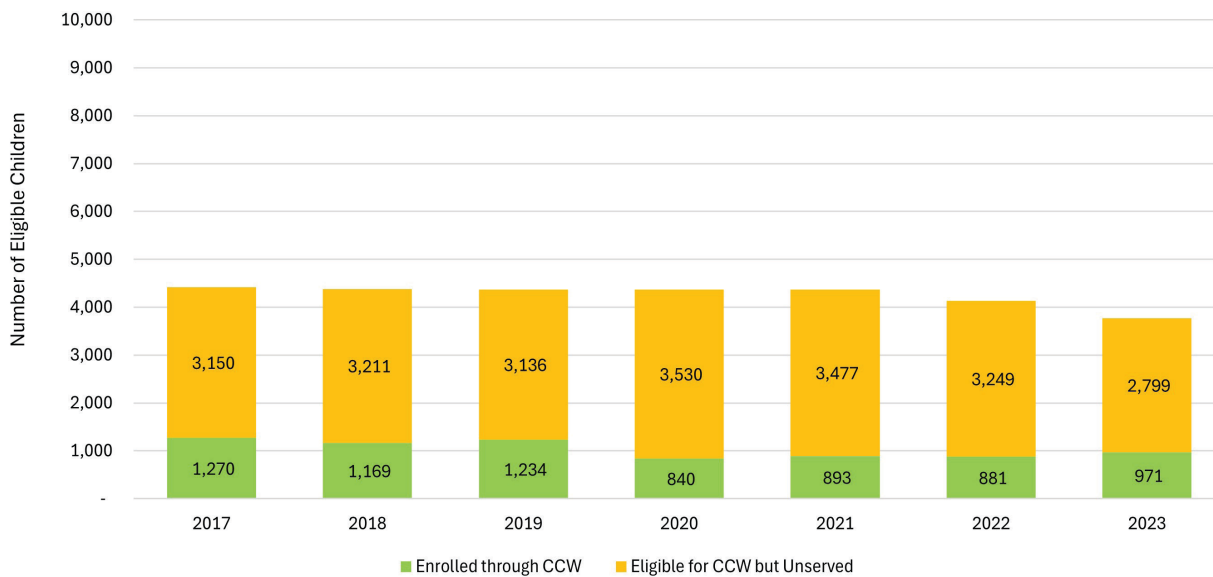
Given the high out-of-pocket cost of child care, state programs like Child Care Works, which provides subsidies to low-income working families, can be a game changer – offsetting the cost of care so parents can work while their children are cared for and educated. Yet 74% of eligible children are not enrolled in Child Care Works.⁴⁵ This is mainly because child care providers have a hard time recruiting and retaining staff and, as a result, must limit the number of children they can serve.

Staffing Shortages Cut Supply

Even though the number of providers in Chester County has remained stable, chronic staffing shortages have forced providers to close classrooms and turn away 712 children in 2024, a number equivalent to two entire public elementary schools.⁴⁶ The reduced capacity of providers to serve more children continues to hold back any progress that was made to increase access to child care over the past ten years.

Low salaries are the primary driving factor for the staffing shortage. The average pay for child care staff in Chester County was \$32,870 in 2023, so close to the federal poverty line that, if they reside in a family of four, they could qualify for a child care subsidy themselves.⁴⁷

64% of Eligible Children in Chester County Cannot Enroll in Subsidized Care Because of Persistent Staffing and Provider Shortages⁴⁸



Their counterparts in the K-12 education system make more than double at \$71,874. Even retail workers make more money than child care staff, approximately \$12,210 more a year.⁴⁹ It is no surprise that providers have struggled to compete with other sectors to hire and retain staff.

Quality Matters

The Pennsylvania STARS program is a state rating system that uses multiple indicators to measure the quality of the early learning program, including factors such as the credentials of the teaching staff. Programs are rated from one to four, with four indicating the highest quality. High-quality programs are rated STAR 3 or STAR 4.

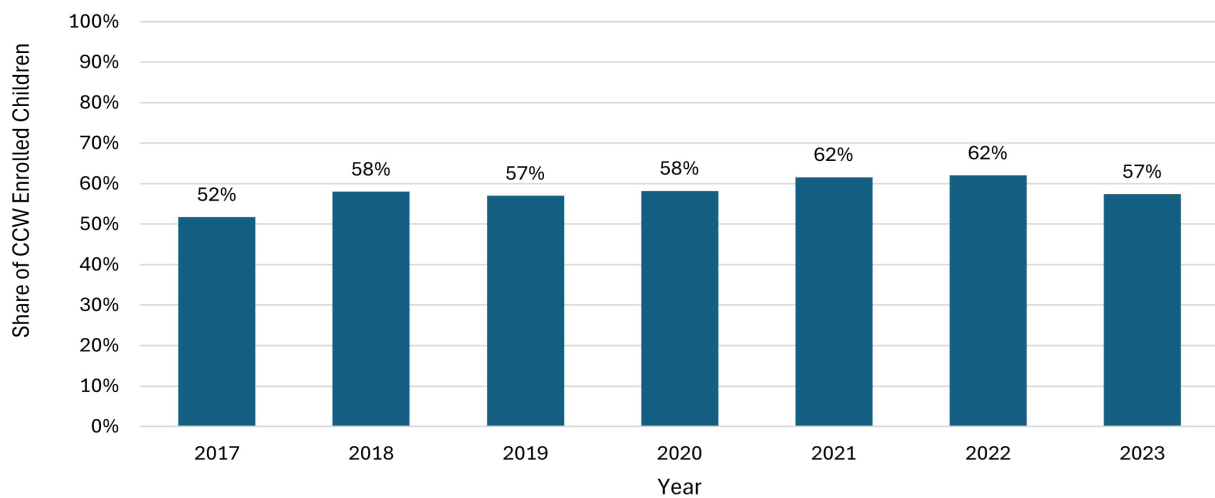
While the number of Chester County children attending high-quality programs has increased over time, unfortunately, 43% of children continue to attend STAR 1 or STAR 2 programs and may not be receiving the maximum benefit of high-quality early childhood education.⁵⁰

15%
 Young families in Chester County spend **15%** of their income on child care; over twice the federal recommended standard.

While access to affordable child care has continued to be a concern for policymakers, it is also important that programs be high-quality. Program quality is an indicator for whether children are receiving the type of education that can build the foundation for life-long success.

Children who have access to high-quality early education are more likely to perform better academically in school, which leads to more promising career prospects and earning potential later on in life.

The Share of Low-Income Children Under 5 in High-Quality Child Care Programs Remained Relatively Unchanged in Chester County, 2017-2023⁵¹



K-12 Education

Over the last ten years, gaps in school quality and funding have plagued some Chester County communities, holding back thousands of students from reaching their full potential. While school districts and charter schools await a sustainable funding solution from state lawmakers, student learning has stalled. Schools should be an economic engine and a driver of upward mobility – but Chester County students from low-income households are still just as likely as ten years ago to attend schools that do not have the funds to provide the resources, teacher support, and environment they need to learn.

Almost All Children have Access to Full-Day Kindergarten

One way to improve early reading and math skills is to give kids access to full-day kindergarten. Almost every child in Chester County has access to full day kindergarten. Nine out of 12 school districts in Chester County offer full-day kindergarten, with Owen J. Roberts just adding the program in 2024.⁵² The remaining three school districts both have plans to offer full-day kindergarten to families in the next one to three years, with Unionville-Chadds Ford and Downingtown opening their programs in 2025-2026 and Tredyffrin/Easttown in 2027-2028.^{53, 54, 55}

The expansion of full-day kindergarten programs is a big win for kids in the county. Ten years ago, only five of the 12 school districts offered full-day kindergarten, and soon every child in the county will have access to the academic, early intervention, and social supports offered by full-day kindergarten.⁵⁶

COVID Drop in Student Achievement Persists

When the pandemic forced schools to close in 2020, students across the county experienced major learning loss that is reflected in dropped test scores.

EDUCATION FAST FACTS FOR CHESTER COUNTY

69,778 Chester County students enrolled in traditional public schools across 12 school districts

4,700 students enrolled in 3 brick and mortar charter schools with tuition costs totaling \$94,253,665

1,039 students in 12 cyber charter schools with tuition costs totaling \$20,365,329

4.8% of students are English Language Learners

4% of high school students are enrolled in career and technical education (CTE)

Five districts, teaching 47% of Chester County have a remaining adequacy gap of \$70 million

Only 67% of third graders can pass English assessments

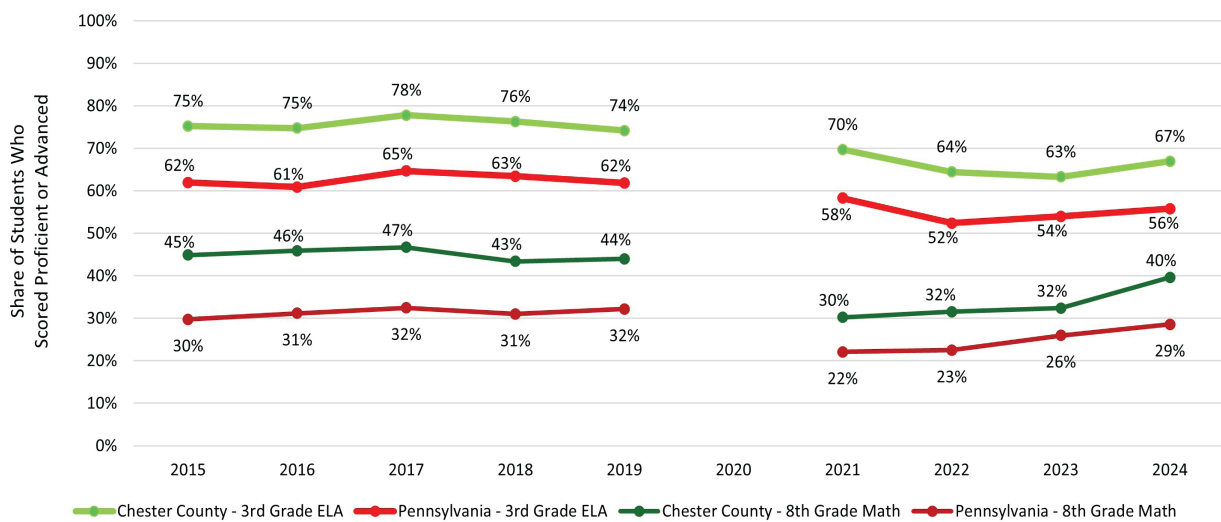
Only 40% of eighth graders can pass math assessments

3 out of 12 school districts do not offer Full Day Kindergarten, but all will offer the program by 2027

The county’s students are gaining back some lost ground, but students are still not back to where they were before the pandemic or where they were nine years ago.⁵⁷ Just two out of every three Chester County third graders can read on grade level and less than half of eighth graders are proficient in math – both major predictors of future success.

Chester County significantly outperforms the statewide average in third grade ELA and eighth grade math.⁵⁸ However, within the county there are stark differences by school district.

Student Performance Suffered and is Still Recovering from COVID Learning Disruptions ⁵⁹

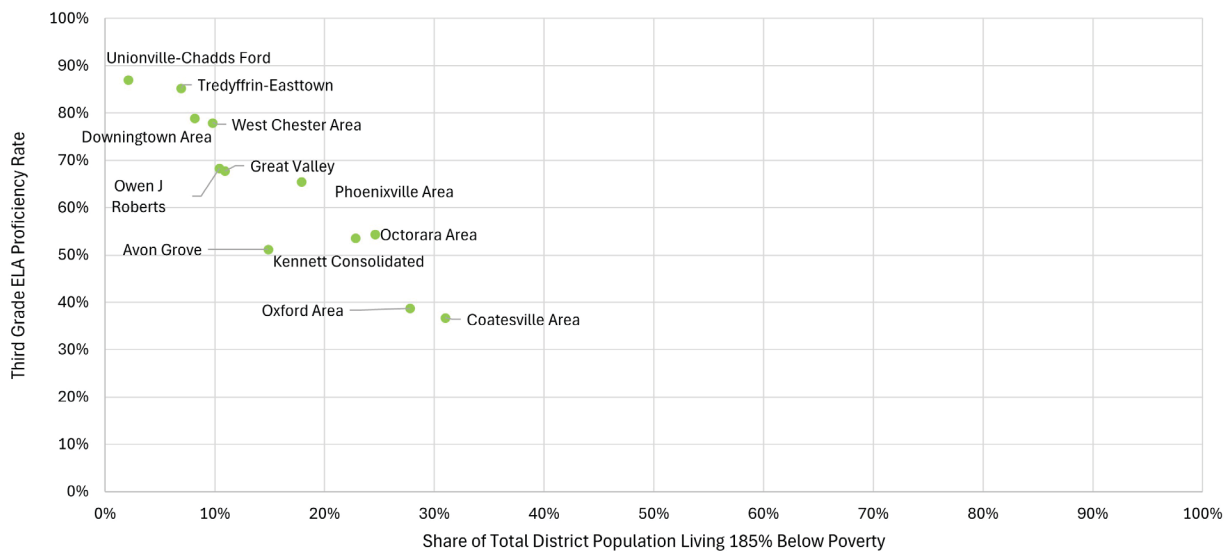


Students in Low-Wealth Districts Lag in Reading and Math Skills

Children who can read proficiently by fourth grade are more likely to be successful in school and career, and are more likely to grow into healthy adults and earn family-sustaining wages.^{60,61} In Chester County, 33% of all third graders (1,746) cannot read proficiently – that’s enough to fill 24 school buses with three kids to a seat!^{62,63} The school districts in the county’s highest-poverty communities have the fewest students who can pass the reading test.⁶⁴

In Coatesville and Oxford, just over one third of third graders are reading on grade level. Just a few miles east in Unionville- Chadds Ford and Treddyfrin-Easttown, almost all third graders can pass the reading test.

Fewer Third Graders in Chester County Can Read Proficiently in High-Poverty School Districts ⁶⁵



In some school districts, funding constraints leave students without much-needed literacy support, like reading specialists, targeted tutoring, and small-group instruction. Another barrier to early literacy success is that some school districts are using the recently debunked “whole language” approach to teaching reading that has produced dismal reading outcomes for decades.⁶⁶

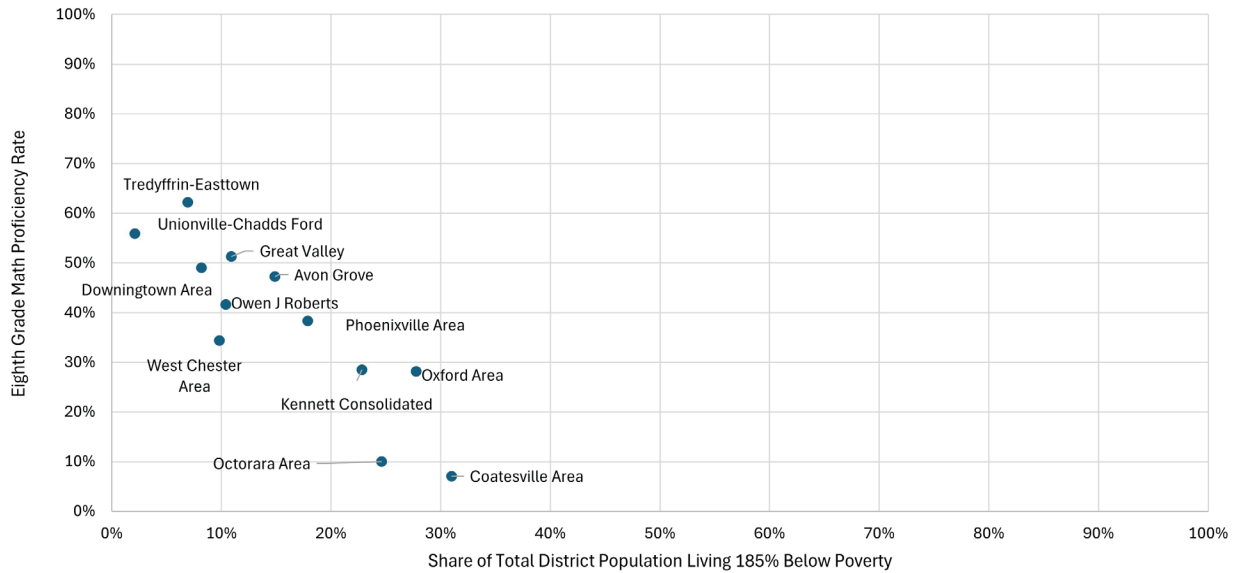
An evidence-based “science of reading” approach offers instructional practices that teachers can use to support all learners. Training teachers and providing them updated curriculum can transform learning outcomes, and it has worked in states like Mississippi.⁶⁷ However, curriculum change is only successful when teachers participate in the process and school districts provide extensive coaching to help teachers implement it well.⁶⁸

Eighth grade math proficiency is a predictor of students’ ability to take on more advanced coursework in high school and college and to apply math skills in their careers.⁶⁹

Eighth grade math proficiency is at a crisis point in low-wealth school districts. There are four school districts where less than 30% of eighth graders can pass the math proficiency test, and they are the districts experiencing the most poverty.⁷⁰



Eighth Graders in Chester County are at a Crisis Point in Math Proficiency in Low-Wealth School Districts ⁷¹



While charter schools are not pictured on the chart due to lack of poverty data availability, the county’s three brick and mortar charter schools and the four cyber charters whose headquarters are in the county all have eighth grade math proficiency rates below 30% as well. At three of the four cyber charters headquartered in Chester County, less than 5% of eighth graders can pass the test.⁷²



Eighth grade math proficiency is at a crisis point in the most poverty stricken school districts.



These math skills deficits are aligned with a disturbing national trend – American eighth graders’ math skills are sharply declining compared to other countries, and math proficiency has dropped among both high-performing and low-performing eighth graders.⁷³ Even in the districts with the highest math proficiency levels, less than three quarters of eighth graders can pass the test.

Many parents don’t know how to help their kids when they struggle with math because of changes in how math is taught in the classroom. The math achievement crisis is putting Chester County students at a disadvantage in college and career.

Many School Districts Have Disproportionately High Local Taxes, Yet Remain Underfunded

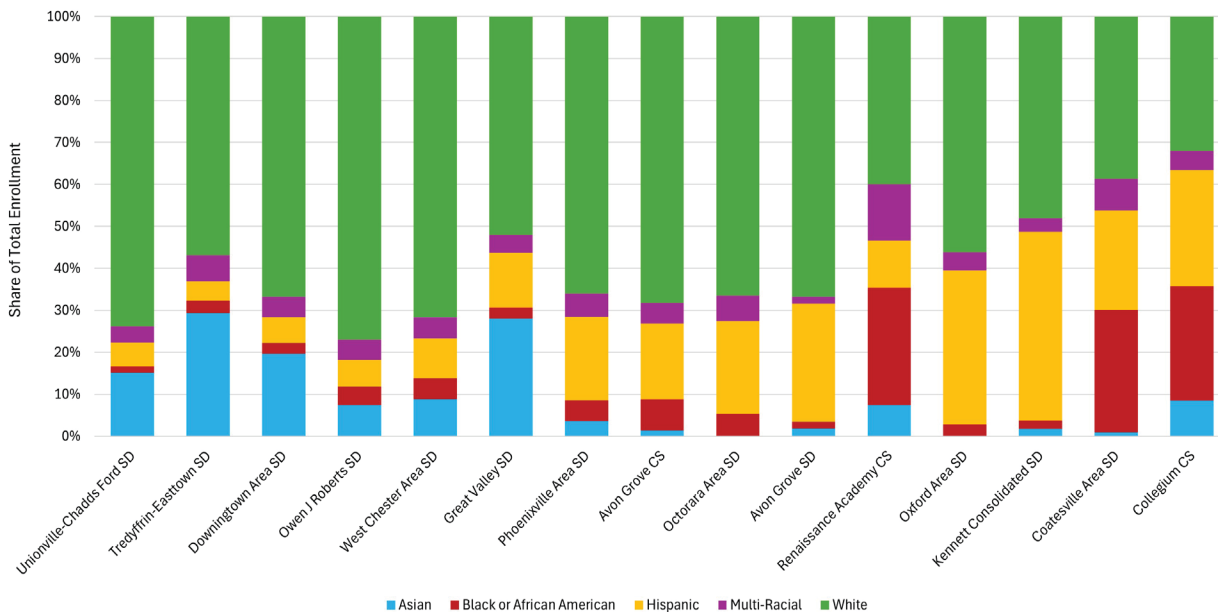
Students of color and low-income families are clustered in a handful of school districts and charter schools in Chester County. These are the school districts with the lowest-value housing stock, which in turn generates the least revenue to fund their local schools.

For example, Oxford Area School District property tax rate of 21.9 mills generates \$11,863 per student.⁷⁴ Meanwhile, Great Valley school district tax rate of 12.7 mills produces \$20,997 per student because their housing values are so much higher than those in Oxford and their commercial tax base is more lucrative. Great Valley’s local taxes give the district almost twice as much per student at around half the local property tax rate. In this broken education funding system, low-wealth communities tax themselves at higher rates and still cannot raise the revenue they need for their local schools.

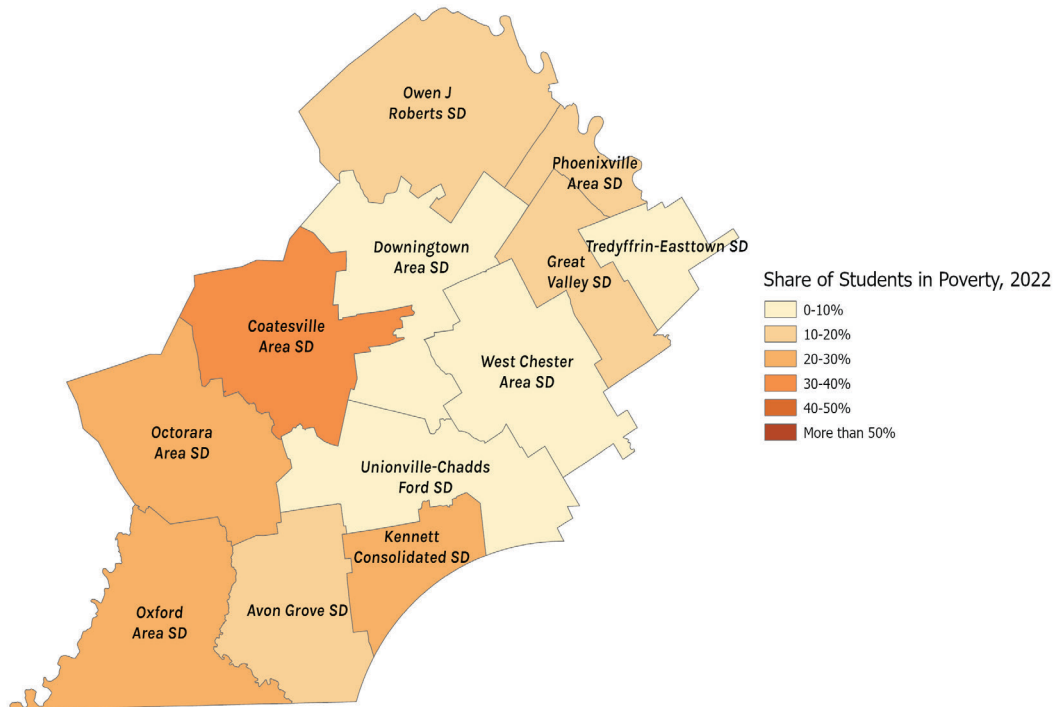
Underfunding is a Pennsylvania problem, not just a Chester County problem. Pennsylvania gets an “A” grade for its overall level of funding but an “F” for the funding distribution, according to a recent Education Law Center report.⁷⁵ That’s because Pennsylvania’s school funding system relies heavily on local property taxes, resulting in massive funding differences between high-wealth and low-wealth school districts.

Because Pennsylvania communities’ wealth is often correlated with its racial makeup, the schools with the highest numbers of Black and Hispanic students have the least funding to educate their students.

Chester County’s Black and Hispanic Students are Clustered in a Few School Districts and Charter Schools⁷⁶



Students from Low-Wealth Families Concentrated in Four School Districts⁷⁷

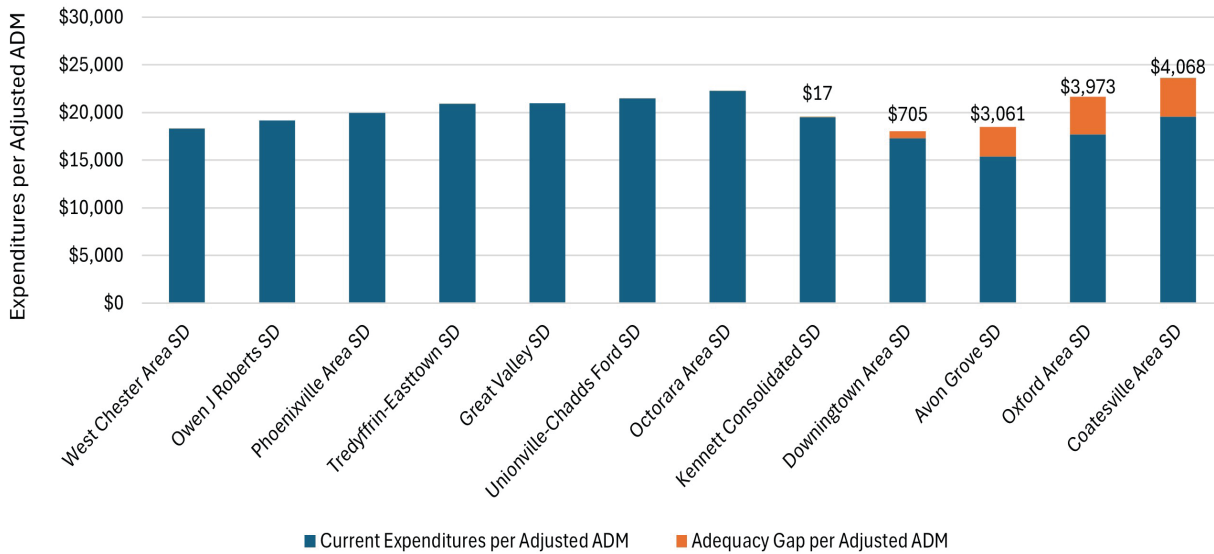


Approximately 11,240 public school students in Chester County are living in poverty.⁷⁸ Overall, the number of students living in poverty has decreased over the last nine years, but the number and share of students in poverty has increased in three Chester County school districts: Downingtown, Great Valley, and West Chester.⁷⁹ Four school districts, Coatesville, Downingtown, Oxford and West Chester, educate over 1,000 students whose families cannot make ends meet. In Coatesville, Octorara, and Oxford, a quarter or more of the student population lives below the poverty line.⁸⁰ Numbers this large require a robust and dedicated plan to educate these students who are the county's future.

The State School Funding Adequacy Gap Persists

To build an effective education system in Chester County, the low-wealth school districts that serve students with the highest needs must be on an equal playing field with wealthier districts. In 2023, Pennsylvania's Commonwealth Court ruled that the state legislature must fix the school funding system and guarantee every child a thorough and efficient education – one that provides basic needs like reasonable class sizes, updated textbooks, and tutoring programs for the students who need it.

Five Chester County School Districts Need More Funding to Adequately Educate Each Student ⁸¹



The state measured the total school funding shortfall to be \$4.5 billion; Chester County’s total shortfall was measured at almost \$79 million.⁸²

Under the leadership of Governor Josh Shapiro, the 2024 state budget introduced \$1.1 billion in new state funds, the largest increase in Pennsylvania history.⁸³ Half of the new state dollars in 2024 will fund adequacy efforts, filling the first 11% of that \$4.5 billion gap. The new adequacy funds must be used to improve student learning and must be approved by the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

Five school districts in Chester County qualify for adequacy funds, which will reach 35,692 students or 47% of students in the country.⁸⁴ The first \$9 million in adequacy funds was released in 2024 leaving a \$70 million adequacy gap to fill.⁸⁵ The other seven school districts also received funding increases to keep up with inflation and other rising costs. Charter schools also receive a share of the adequacy funding for each student who lives in the catchment of an adequacy-receiving school district.

A Shortage of High School Career Oriented Courses

Students enrolled in career and technical education (CTE) programs in high school can earn industry-recognized credentials and college credits before graduating high school, equipping them to quickly enter a skilled career or higher education.⁸⁶ Although the FY24 state budget added \$30 million more for CTE, an overall lack of state investment and outdated policies obstruct more students from accessing these effective programs.⁸⁷

As a result, less than 4% of Chester County high school students (1,070) are enrolled as CTE concentrators, the lowest share of the five southeastern Pennsylvania counties.⁸⁸ (A CTE concentrator is a student who successfully completes at least half of their CTE coursework.) The number of students in these promising programs unfortunately saw virtually no change since 2014.

Only 4% of high school students in Chester County are enrolled in Career/Technical Education programs.



Enrolled in Career/Technical Education

Promisingly though is the fact that nearly half (46%) of Chester County CTE concentrators come from families in poverty, demonstrating demand for the programs from students of low-income families and a desire from parents to do what they can to help their children graduate high school and enter the middle class.^{89,90} Another indicator of the prosperity of CTE programs is the fact that Chester County CTE concentrators are outperforming their peers across the state. Roughly 37% of the county's CTE students pursued a postsecondary education, compared to a third of CTE students statewide.⁹¹

Still CTE enrollment rates are severely depressed due to resource limitations. State funds currently cover only 9% of CTE costs, requiring school districts to foot 88% of the costs (3% is covered by the federal Perkins V Grant).⁹² As a result, programs that serve students in many low-wealth school districts cannot afford the materials and equipment needed to prepare students for their careers. Statewide programs also suffer from teacher shortages and large enrollment waitlists. Over 200 of the state's teacher vacancies are for CTE positions, and an estimated 27,000 students are on CTE waitlists.⁹³

Teachers are the Lynchpin to Learning

For math, English, and every other subject at school, the most important factor in student learning is their teacher. Students need qualified educators who can support their diverse needs. The teacher's level of instructional skill, years of experience, and culturally competent skillset matter but the major statewide teacher shortage has made it hard for the most underfunded school districts to recruit and retain qualified educators.⁹⁴



Across Chester County in 2023, 92 teacher and school worker positions were unfilled and an additional 39 positions were being temporarily filled by substitutes.⁹⁵

Coatesville School District and Collegium Charter School had the most vacancies; these schools also serve a large share of students of color and students from low-income families.

To attract new teachers, school districts need to offer compelling starting salaries but there are wide gaps in starting pay ranging from \$51,507 in Coatesville to \$62,114 in Unionville-Chadds Ford.⁹⁶ Differences in teacher salaries make it much more attractive for teachers to choose wealthier school districts and exacerbate educational inequities.

Charter School Costs Rise Faster Than Other Costs

For over a decade, a major factor has been diverting funds away from the traditional public school system—charter school tuition. Chester County’s school districts pay more than \$20 million to cyber charter schools where student achievement is far worse than students at traditional public schools.⁹⁷

Chester County school districts paid an additional \$94 million to brick and mortar charter schools in the same period.

Cyber charter school payments in Chester County rose by

66%

in eight years,

reaching

\$20 million



Child Health

Chester County is the wealthiest per-capita county in Pennsylvania, yet it faces ongoing challenges in ensuring equitable healthcare access, particularly for low-income families and communities of color.¹⁰⁰ Despite high insurance coverage and low unemployment, systemic gaps limit care for both insured and underinsured residents, especially those in poverty who become less visible in aggregated data.

The 2022 closures of Brandywine and Jennersville Hospitals created significant access gaps, particularly in mental health and emergency services.¹⁰¹ A shortage of mental health providers, many of whom do not accept insurance, further exacerbates this issue, especially for young people facing rising mental health concerns.

Rising housing costs also make it difficult for residents, including healthcare providers, to live and work in the county.¹⁰² Disparities persist across race and geography, particularly affecting foster children, who face language and access barriers, limiting their ability to access critical services like Medicaid.

In response, the county has launched initiatives to address these gaps, including the Haven Behavioral Hospital, Chester County Hospital's expansion, and a three-pillar crisis response system.^{103,104} Local efforts, such as youth-led mental health advocacy and increased services for uninsured residents, reflect a commitment to health equity.

Medicaid Processes Cause Thousands of Children to Lose Access to Health Care

As the county increases its focus on improving the health of its children, state and federal Medicaid policies are making it harder to ensure that children are doing better. Healthcare access for children in Chester County is closely tied to Medicaid, a critical support for families with limited income who cannot afford private insurance.

CHILD HEALTH FAST FACTS FOR CHESTER COUNTY

In 2023, 34,867 children in Chester County were on Medicaid and 2,356 were on CHIP

In 2023, 5,163 children were affected by Medicaid unwinding, primarily due to procedural disenrollments

4,320 children in Chester County are uninsured⁹⁸

71% of Chester County children are still not screened for lead

15% of Chester County 12th graders considered suicide; 4% reported attempting suicide

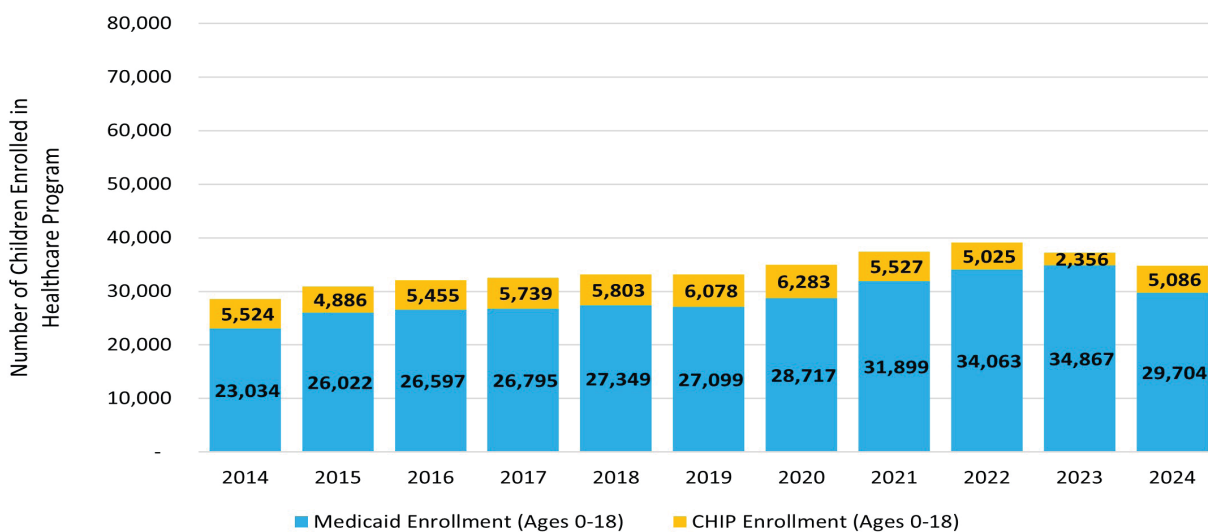
Nearly a third (31%) of Chester County students report feeling sad or depressed most days

The teen pregnancy rate in Chester County fell from 14 to 9 pregnancies per 1,000 females aged 15-19⁹⁹

There is one licensed mental health provider for every 330 Chester County residents.

From 2014 to 2023, Medicaid enrollment for children in Chester County steadily increased, peaking at 34,867 in 2023.¹⁰⁵ This upward trend reflects both a growing reliance on public health insurance and the effectiveness of Medicaid in filling healthcare access gaps for low-income families. However, following the reinstatement of annual renewal requirements in April 2023, Medicaid enrollment dropped sharply in 2024 to 29,704 - a loss of 5,163 children, primarily due to procedural disenrollments after the pandemic associated with change in federal rules which required families to re-enroll. (This process is often referred to as “Medicaid unwinding.”)

New Downward Trend in Medicaid Enrollment Likely Means Fewer Children Have Health Insurance ¹⁰⁶

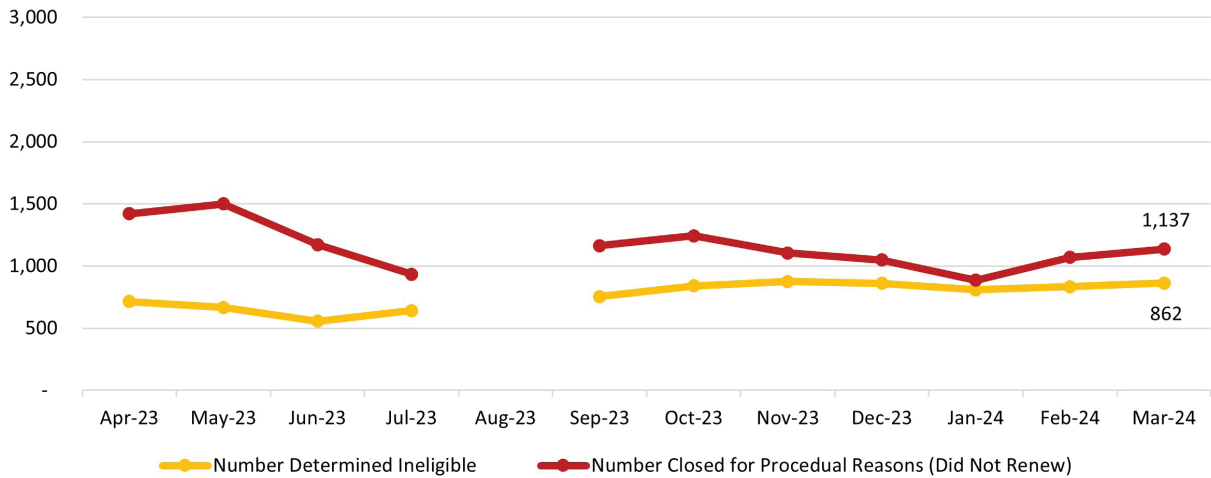


For many families, the complexity of re-enrollment requirements – such as submitting digital documents or meeting strict deadlines – proved insurmountable. Families with housing instability, limited digital access, or limited English proficiency are disproportionately impacted, as these obstacles hinder their ability to complete re-enrollment processes on time. Without Medicaid, children with diagnosed health conditions lose access to specialized services, risking gaps in care, treatment disruptions, and higher out-of-pocket costs.

Since Medicaid renewal requirements resumed, families in Chester County have faced significant challenges in maintaining this coverage. Between April 2023 and March 2024, more than 1,000 Chester County children lost their Medicaid coverage every month not because of ineligibility, but because of procedural barriers stemming from the unwinding.¹⁰⁷

Furthermore, children with special health needs are eligible for Medicaid without regard to family income. Many special needs children are enrolled in an employer-based health insurance which typically does not cover essential mental health services.

The Number of Children Disenrolled from Medicaid is Rising ¹⁰⁸



In 2024, Chester County counted 5,766 children enrolled on Medicaid based on a diagnosed disability, including physical, intellectual, developmental, or psychiatric disability. This is an increase of 410 children since 2022 despite the high percentage of disenrollment.^{109,110} Loss of coverage for procedural reasons disproportionately affects children with special health needs whose access to essential mental health services depends on maintaining Medicaid enrollment.

When children lose Medicaid coverage, they often miss preventive care and treatment for chronic conditions, as well as essential mental health services. For example, a child with untreated asthma may require emergency care for preventable attacks, while a child with a behavioral health condition may face treatment delays that exacerbate their symptoms.

Medicaid enrollment dropped sharply in 2024 to 29,704 - a loss of coverage for 5,163 children.

Environmental Factors Increase Childhood Illness

Beyond healthcare access, environmental health justice remains a critical issue in Chester County, where systemic inequities expose marginalized communities to greater environmental hazards. Older housing, poor indoor air quality, and exposure to environmental stressors like air pollution contribute to rising childhood asthma rates and increasing preterm births. These systemic inequities highlight the urgent need for comprehensive policies that address both the environmental and social determinants of health, ensuring that all children, regardless of race or income, have access to safe housing, clean air, and quality healthcare.

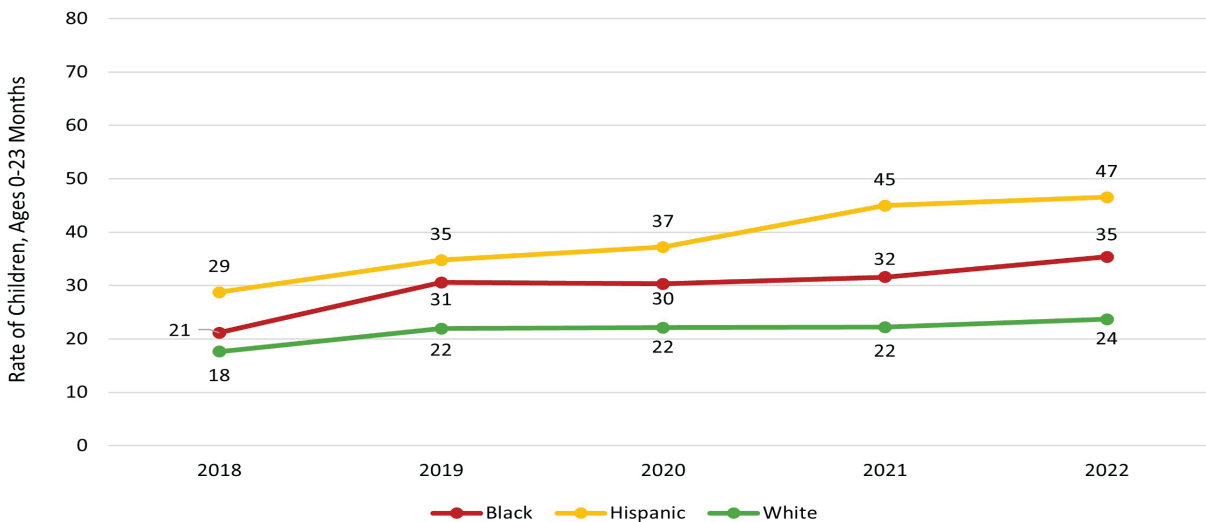
Lead Toxins Continue to Cause Permanent Harm

Lead education and prevention measures by county agencies are critical. Lead exposure is a significant health risk for children in Chester County, particularly in areas where 48% of the housing stock was built before 1978 when lead-based paint was banned.¹¹¹ Lead poisoning is linked to irreversible cognitive and behavioral damage, contributing to poorer academic performance and long-term economic disadvantages for affected children.¹¹²

Additionally, the financial burden on healthcare and education systems is significant, as children with elevated blood lead levels (EBLL) often require specialized medical care and support services.

This exposure poses severe risks to cognitive, behavioral, and physical development. Data from 2022 shows that only 29% of children under age two were tested for lead, which is an improvement over previous years.¹¹³ Hispanic children had the highest lead testing rates (47%), followed by Black children (35%) and white children (24%). These higher testing rates are linked to greater utilization of Medicaid among these communities, as Medicaid requires lead testing two times before the age of two.

Less than 30% of Children are Tested for Lead Exposure ¹¹⁴



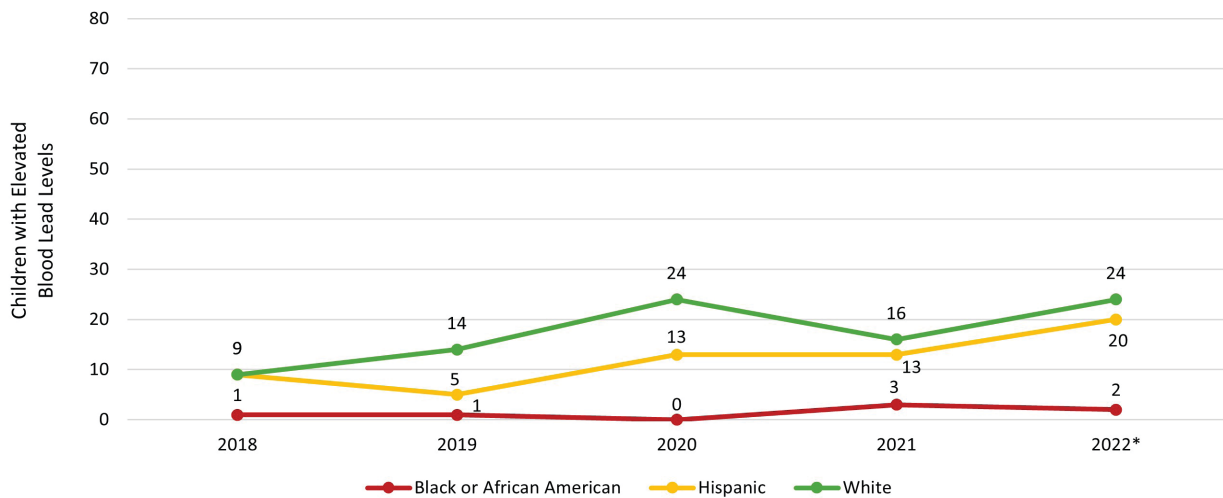
Despite improved testing rates compared to previous years, about 71% of Chester County children were still not screened for lead, leaving a significant portion of the population vulnerable to undetected exposure.¹¹⁵

While Black children have historically faced disproportionately high rates of EBLL, Chester County follows a different pattern.

In Chester County, Hispanic and white children have higher rates of lead poisoning than Black children.¹¹⁶ This disparity is likely due to differences in housing conditions, as Hispanic and white families in this county are more concentrated in older and historic homes with lead hazards. This trend underscores the importance of universal lead testing for all children—regardless of income, race, or background—to ensure early detection and access to necessary remediation resources.

71% of children in Chester County are not screened for exposure to toxic lead.

Hispanic and White Children Face High Risks of Lead Exposure ¹¹⁷



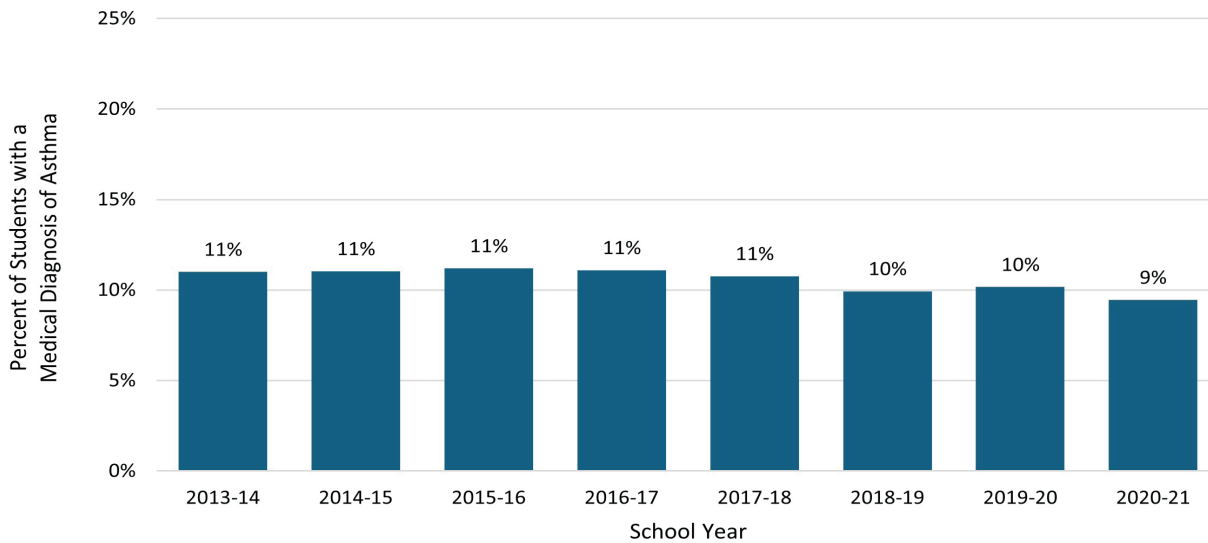
In 2022, the CDC lowered the blood lead reference level from 5 µg/dL to 3.5 µg/dL, reflecting growing evidence that no level of lead exposure is safe for children.¹¹⁸ This adjustment enhances early detection of lead exposure’s harmful effects but may create the perception of rising EBLL rates when, in fact, the change reflects a more sensitive standard. Lead education and prevention measures by county agencies are therefore critical.

Progress on Childhood Asthma

Childhood asthma remains a key environmental health concern in Chester County. While the county has seen progress in reducing asthma rates—from 11% in 2013 to 9% in 2021—Black and low-income families continue to bear a disproportionate burden.¹¹⁹

Poor housing conditions, including mold, pests, and inadequate ventilation, are significant contributors to asthma symptoms. These environmental triggers exacerbate respiratory health disparities, leaving affected children at higher risk of missed school days, hospital visits, and chronic complications.

Share of Students with Asthma Dropped by Two Points ¹²⁰



Progress in asthma reduction highlights the potential for interventions to improve health outcomes when addressing root causes. However, systemic inequities in housing quality and access to healthcare mean that many children remain vulnerable. Improving indoor air quality and expanding public health initiatives targeting asthma triggers are essential steps toward ensuring equitable outcomes for all children.

Increasing Diversity in the County Brings Black Maternal Health Disparities to the Foreground

Environmental health disparities in Chester County also extend to maternal and infant health, as evidenced by rising preterm birth rates. From 2016 to 2023, overall preterm births across all races appear to have plateaued around 13%. When disaggregated by race, however, disparities emerge. Black mothers experience the highest rates of preterm births at 14%, followed by white mothers at 12%, and 10% for Hispanic mothers.^{121, 122} These disparities highlight the disproportionate burden on Black mothers who consistently face the highest rates in Chester County and across Pennsylvania. Environmental stressors, including air pollution and limited access to quality prenatal care, play a significant role in these inequities.

However, progress is being made through legislative action. In 2024, the Pennsylvania state legislature passed two key provisions that extend Medicaid coverage for doula services and raise awareness about postpartum depression and centralize counseling resources. These measures aim to provide critical support for pregnant and postpartum individuals, especially in underserved communities.¹²³ While these efforts are a step forward, more work needs to be done.

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**Black mothers experience
 the highest rates of
 preterm births at 14%.**
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Vaccination Compliance Rates Worsened

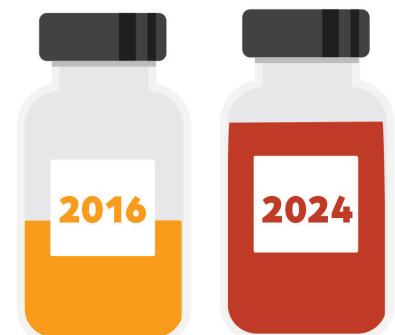
Childhood vaccination rates in Chester County have experienced troubling declines over the past decade, signaling missed opportunities to protect children from preventable diseases. Vaccines such as DTaP, MMR, and varicella are essential for children under age six to build immunity against diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis (whooping cough), measles, mumps, rubella, and chickenpox.

Rising vaccine exemption rates put children’s lives at risk and increase the likelihood of disease transmission in schools and communities. Nationwide, routine vaccination rates for kindergartners declined during the pandemic, dropping during the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years after a decade of stability.¹²⁴ Coverage failed to return to pre-pandemic levels in 2022-23, compounded by vaccine misinformation, hesitancy, and more exemptions.¹²⁵

From 2015 to 2024, the exemption rate of Chester County kindergartners nearly doubled from 2% to 3.5%.^{126,127} While this rate may seem small, it jeopardizes herd immunity which requires high coverage for many diseases. For example, there must be a minimum 95% measles vaccination rate to prevent an outbreak.¹²⁸

These shifts have real-world consequences. In 2022, Chester County reported just zero cases of pertussis. By 2024, that number had surged to 257 cases, contributing to Pennsylvania’s tenfold increase to over 2,000 cases statewide—the highest rate in the nation.^{129, 130} While historically high vaccination rates have prevented large-scale outbreaks of diseases like measles and meningitis, the resurgence of pertussis underscores the urgent need to reverse these trends across all age groups to protect the most susceptible individuals.

The share of children in Chester County starting school without required vaccinations **increased by 75%** since 2016.



Young People Still Struggle with their Mental Health

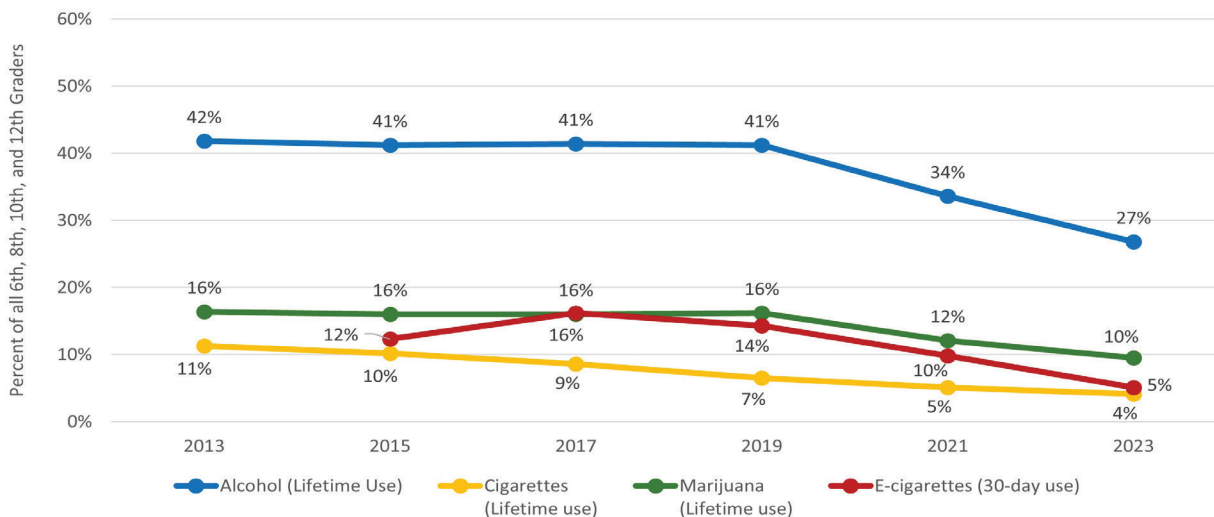
One in five children experience a mental, emotional, or behavioral health disorder.¹³¹ Alarmingly, in Chester County this translates to at least 23,808 children, and because of barriers to care, fewer than half of them will receive the treatment they need. This crisis is exacerbated by the shortage of mental health providers, a systemic issue which can also be observed nationwide. Families in Chester County frequently report significant challenges in accessing timely and appropriate care for their children, highlighting a critical gap in the local system. There is only one licensed mental health provider for every 330 Chester County residents.¹³²

Teen Drinking, Drugs, and Smoking All Decline

Risk behaviors are important measures when considering youth mental health because research consistently has shown a strong association between engaging in risk behaviors and negative mental health outcomes. The CDC defines risk behaviors as actions that increase the likelihood of injury, disease, or other negative health outcomes. Risk behaviors include lifetime use of substances including alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, and e-cigarettes (vaping).

Across all risk behaviors, substance use plummeted in the last decade. The percentage of Chester County students grades six to 12 who report lifetime use of alcohol has decreased from 42% of students in 2013 to only 27% in 2023.¹³³ Similarly, marijuana use fell from 16% to 10%, and cigarette use declined from 11% to 4% over the same period. For vaping, since 2015 use over the past 30 days initially rose but overall decreased from 12% to 5%.¹³⁴ According to Chester County health officials, the decrease in these risk behaviors does not appear to be attributable to any specific public health campaign or intervention.

Risky Youth Behaviors Show Precipitous Drop ¹³⁵

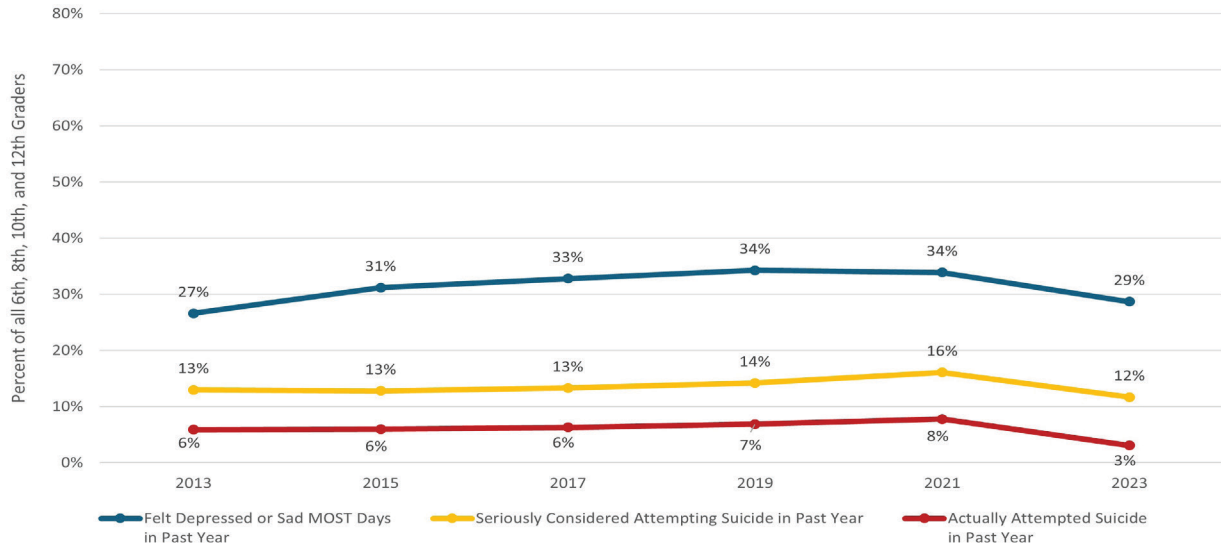


Teen Depression, Anxiety, and Suicide - Red Flag Trends

The Pennsylvania Youth Survey (PAYS) has shown the consistently high prevalence of mental health symptoms over the past decade.¹³⁶ Although Chester County's data mirrors statewide and national trends with fewer children engaging in risk behaviors, this decline has not corresponded with an improvement in mental health, with children continuing to experience high rates of depression, anxiety, stress, and suicidal ideation.

Children and youth have been struggling with the same levels of depression and anxiety for the last decade, although the perception is that mental health challenges spiked only during (and because of) the pandemic.

Stubbornly High Indicators of Mental Distress Went Unabated ¹³⁷



Among sixth to twelfth graders in Chester County, the percentage of youth who reported feeling sad or depressed most days in the past year remained relatively stable starting at 27% in 2013 and ending at 29% in 2023, peaking in 2019 and 2021 at 34% thus not fully related to COVID school closures.¹³⁸

In Chester County, students who considered suicide and attempted suicide peaked in 2021 and decreased in 2023, although the trendline shows less dramatic change - 13% of Chester County students considered suicide in 2013, compared with 12% in 2023.¹³⁹ This is in alignment with the data on depression and sadness, showing that levels of suicidal ideation have remained relatively consistent in the last decade. While the percentage of students who attempted suicide dropped from 6% in 2013 to 3% in 2023, the overall trendline shows only a slight decrease over time. It is possible that the 2023 data is an outlier and should be monitored closely in the coming years.

This contradiction – improved behavior paired with declining well-being – points to the profound impact of technology and social media. The U.S. Surgeon General issued a health advisory that “social media can have profound risk of harm to the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents.”¹⁴⁰ Emerging research highlights how smartphones and social media have fundamentally reshaped how children interact with one another, often leaving them more isolated, less engaged in-person, and more depressed.¹⁴¹

Youth interactions increasingly occur online, contributing to a decline in in-person risky behaviors like substance use. However, the isolation of digital interactions may exacerbate mental health challenges, lacking the richness of face-to-face connections.

Chester County health officials report rising depression and despair among children, trends not fully reflected in current PAYS data. The complex relationship between risk behaviors and mental health underscores the need for urgent public health solutions, including improved access to mental health care, healthy technology use, and fostering genuine in-person connections.

Tracking youth mental health outcomes requires more robust data at the county level. Since its launch in July 2022, the national 988 Lifeline, a 24/7 crisis resource, has answered 2,337 calls from Chester County residents.¹⁴²

As local 988 call centers become more established, monitoring their impact will be crucial to addressing the community’s mental health needs.



The U.S. Surgeon General issued a health advisory that “social media can have profound risk of harm to the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents.”



Child Welfare & Juvenile Justice

Ten Year Indicators for Child Abuse and Neglect Fluctuate

Children have the best chance at a bright future when they can grow up with their needs met in their own homes, families, and communities – without the trauma of abuse or neglect or separation from their parents. Decades of research shows that family adversity, including poverty, is linked to a higher occurrence of abuse and neglect.¹⁴³ Abuse, neglect, and placement in foster care are all associated with a greater likelihood of mental health challenges, substance use, and poor educational outcomes.^{144,145,146}

Over the past decade, the number of substantiated child abuse and neglect reports in Chester County has fluctuated. Calls to the hotline peaked in 2017 at 1,189 but just 87 of those were substantiated.¹⁴⁷ Substantiated reports reached highs of 123 in 2020 and 2022, despite lower numbers of overall reports.

If a report does not rise to the level of abuse or neglect but alleges that a family needs services, it is assigned as General Protective Services (GPS).

CHILD WELFARE FAST FACTS FOR CHESTER COUNTY

123 substantiated reports of child abuse and neglect

2,310 children receiving in-home services

29 children entering foster care

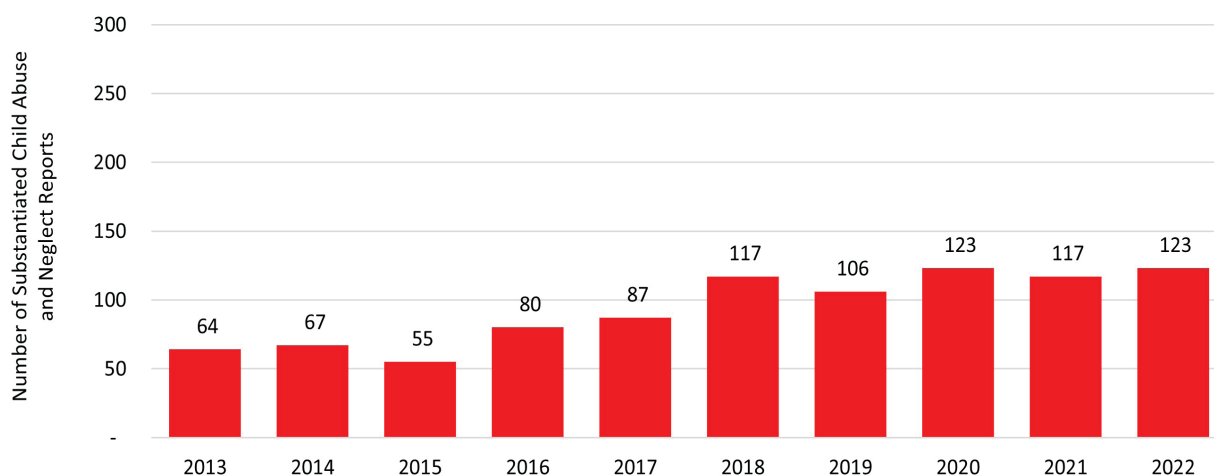
JUVENILE JUSTICE FAST FACTS FOR CHESTER COUNTY

284 youth arrests

155 secure detention admissions

49 long-term facility placements

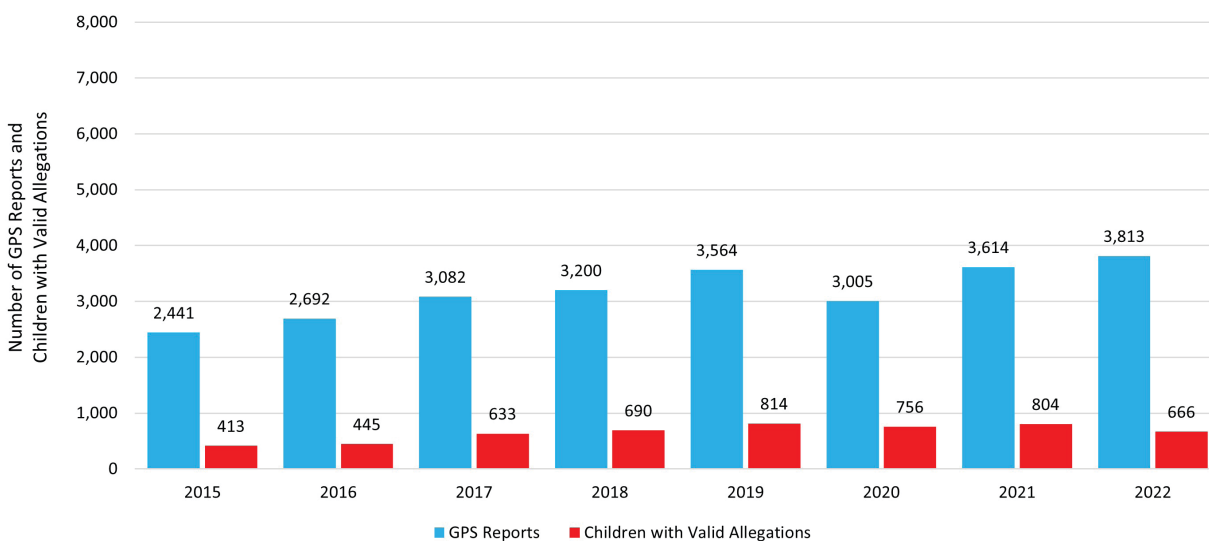
Substantiated Cases of Abuse or Neglect Reach Ten Year High ¹⁴⁸



The number of valid GPS reports has increased over time, from a low of 413 in 2015 to a high of 814 in 2019.¹⁴⁹ By 2022, valid GPS reports had declined to 666 despite a spike in overall reports that year.

Experts agree that the increase in reports following the 2020 pandemic can be attributed to several factors, such as families’ return to regular contact with schools, medical offices, social services, and other reporting sources, along with the economic and social toll of the pandemic on family stability and well-being.

Annually, Hundreds of Children and their Families Need Services to Reduce the Risk of Abuse and Neglect¹⁵⁰



Instead of removing children from the home when there are no immediate safety threats, Chester County Children and Youth Services refers families to community supports, like mental health or housing services, and continues to work with them. In 2022, 2,310 Chester County children and their families received in-home services to address needs related to safety, risk of harm, and overall child and family well-being.¹⁵¹ This represents a slight increase from 2014, when 2,012 children received services in their homes.¹⁵² This change reflects a shift in focus toward maintaining families safely together and allocating resources to concrete supports and other services that prevent foster care placement.

Fewer Children are Removed from their Families

When children cannot be safely maintained in their homes, the child welfare agency is responsible for placement outside of the home, ideally with a relative, but if a relative is unavailable, in a licensed foster home.

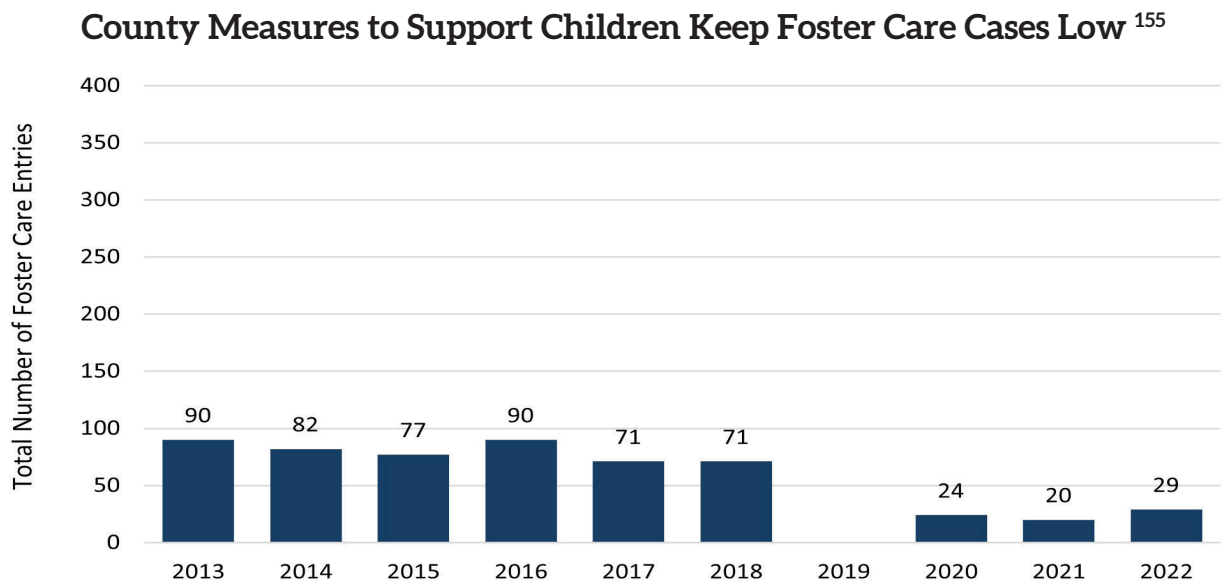
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15% more children and their families are receiving in-home services associated with abuse or neglect from 2014 to 2022.

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A total of 78 Chester County children were in foster care in 2022, a 65% decrease from 221 children in foster care in 2014.¹⁵³ Primary reasons for placement in out-of-home care in Chester County include parental mental health problems, substance use, inability or failure to meet children’s needs, and lack of an available parent.

The number of Chester County children entering into out-of-home placement has decreased significantly over time, from a high of 90 in 2013 and 2016 to a low of 20 in 2021, increasing slightly to 29 in 2022.¹⁵⁴

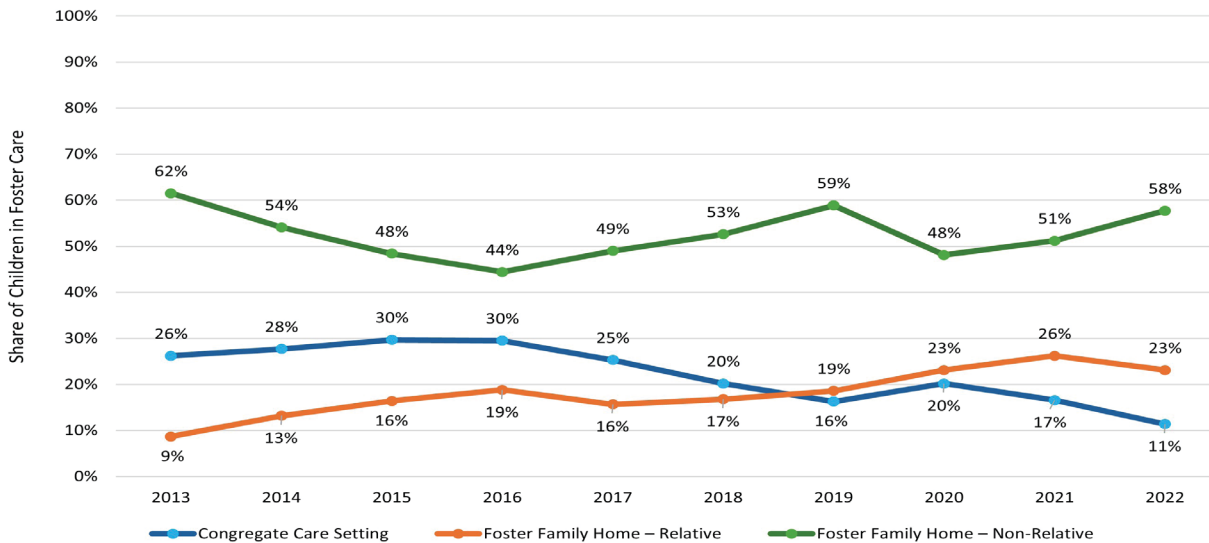


The overall decrease in foster care placements aligns with the national trend to focus on foster care prevention, most notably indicated by the enactment of the federal Family First Prevention Services Act in 2019, which provides federal reimbursement to states and jurisdictions for prevention services.

Racial disproportionality continues to pervade the system in Chester County, with Black, Hispanic, and multiracial children representing 52% of the total foster care population but only 22% of the total child population.¹⁵⁶ This overrepresentation exists not just locally, but across the Commonwealth and nationally.

Fewer than a quarter of children in Chester County are in relative placements, while 58% are placed with non-relatives.¹⁵⁷ The number of children in the foster care system placed in congregate (residential group care) settings has declined significantly over time, down to a low of 11% in 2022.

Chester County Keeps 89% of Foster Children Out of Congregate Care. Most Children Needing Foster Care Placements are with Non-Relative Foster Parents ¹⁵⁸



Hidden Foster Care

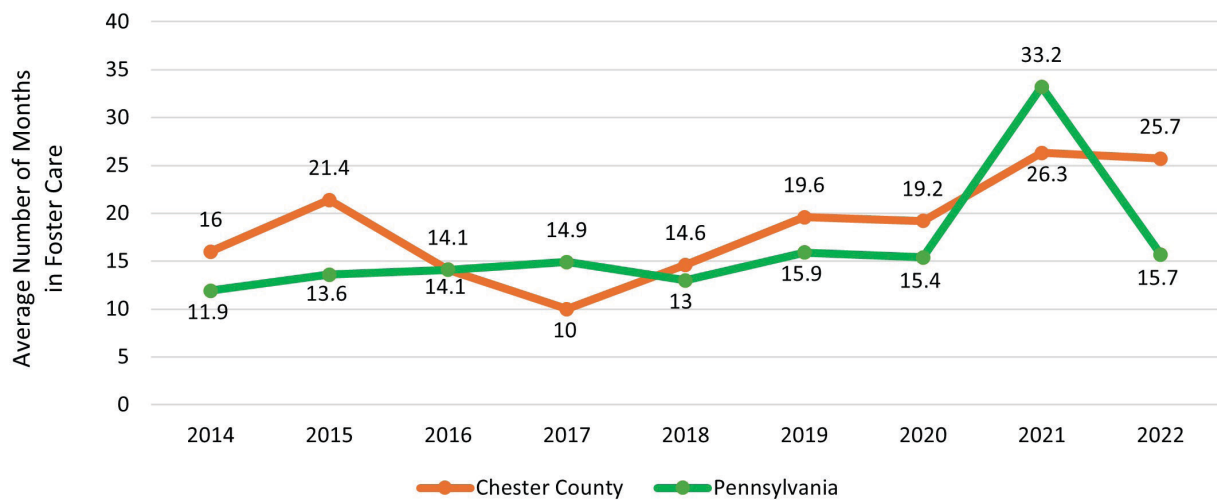
What is not reflected in the data are informal arrangements where children are taken in by relatives outside of a formal court-supervised placement. Under these circumstances, children benefit from being placed with family instead of someone they don't know. However, without the intervention of the court, these caregivers – who are often struggling to make ends meet themselves – are only eligible for certain public benefits and miss out on the financial assistance they would receive, like a foster care subsidy, if they were a part of the formal system.

Real Challenges to Permanency for Some Foster Children

Foster care is meant to be a temporary arrangement for children while their families work to address safety and risk factors in the home. Long stays in foster care are associated with placement instability, and those young people who “age out,” transitioning to adulthood from foster care without a permanent caregiver, are more likely to have long-term education, housing, employment, and mental health challenges than those with stable long-term caregivers.^{159,160}

Though the average length of stay spiked in 2021 (likely due to court delays and extended foster care provisions during the pandemic), children in Chester County are more recently remaining in out-of-home care for an average of 25.7 months, which is significantly longer than the statewide average of 15.7 months.¹⁶¹

On Average, Chester County Children Spend Two Years in Foster Care¹⁶²



In recent years, discharges to permanent arrangements (reunification, adoption or guardianship) have fluctuated slightly, but hit a low of 79% in 2022. Discharges to non-permanent arrangements (e.g., aging out of foster care into adulthood vs. being reunified with family or adopted) have increased in recent years, hitting a high of 21.2% in 2022.¹⁶³

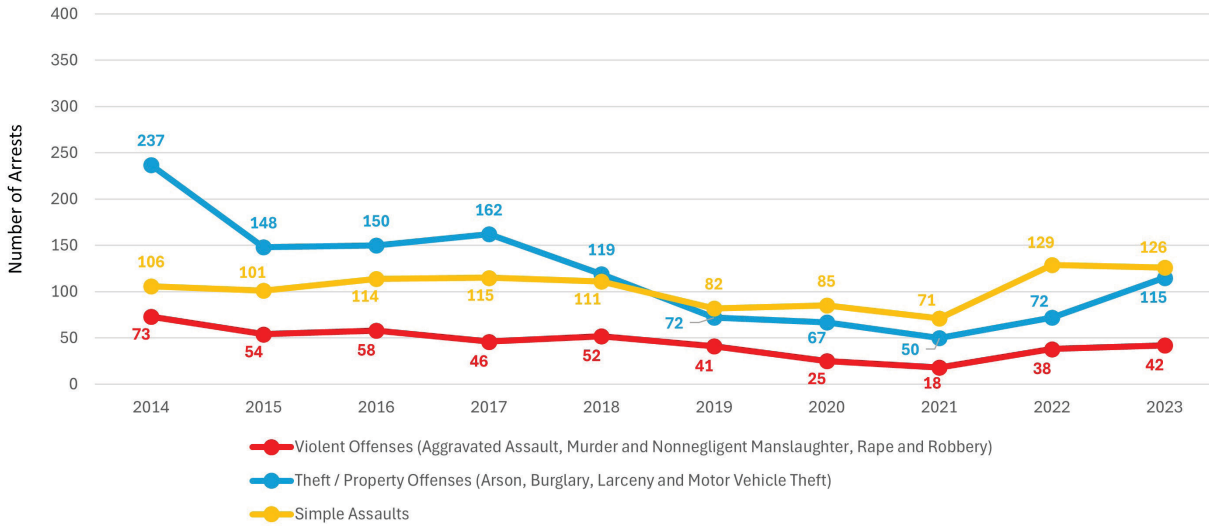
These changes may be associated with the county's very low rate of entry (0.2%) into care, i.e., the children and families in the formal foster care system may have more complex needs that require additional time and effort prior to achieving permanency. It could also be associated with staffing constraints reported across the sector, as well as a lack of adequate mental health and substance abuse services in the community.

Juvenile Justice

When they have their needs met in their communities, children are also less likely to be involved in the legal system.¹⁶⁴ Young people who do break the law fare better when they have the opportunity to repair the harm they've caused outside of the court system.¹⁶⁵ Being locked up is associated with worse educational outcomes, worse mental health, and lower earning potential as adults. Youth who are incarcerated are up to 80% more likely to be rearrested within three years of release, and they're more likely to be locked up or placed on probation as adults.¹⁶⁶

Youth crime, arrests, and incarceration, both in Chester County and across Pennsylvania, have declined over the past decade.

Youth Crime in Chester County Decreased for Most of the Past Decade, but Recently is on the Rise Again¹⁶⁷

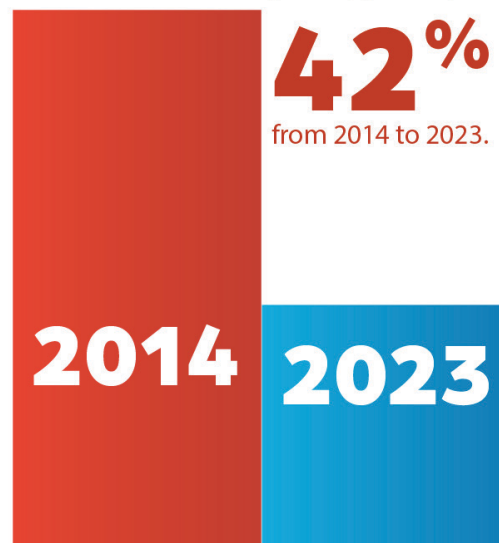


Following the COVID pandemic, there has been an increase in youth arrests, with arrests for property crimes – the most common offense – increasing 60% from 2022 to 2023.¹⁶⁸ Though the numbers remained low overall, violent offenses more than doubled between 2021 and 2022 from 18 to 38, respectively, and increased to 42 in 2023. Simple assaults (e.g., school fights) increased 82% between 2021 and 2022 and then declined slightly in 2023.

While income data is currently unavailable for youth in the juvenile justice system, the number of thefts and other property offenses further underscores the economic hardships faced by young people and their families, as well as a potential lack of available community-based prosocial activities to occupy youth time. County officials report that young people enter the juvenile justice system with mental health needs that the justice system is not designed or equipped to treat, and that greater access to community mental health services could prevent youth arrests.

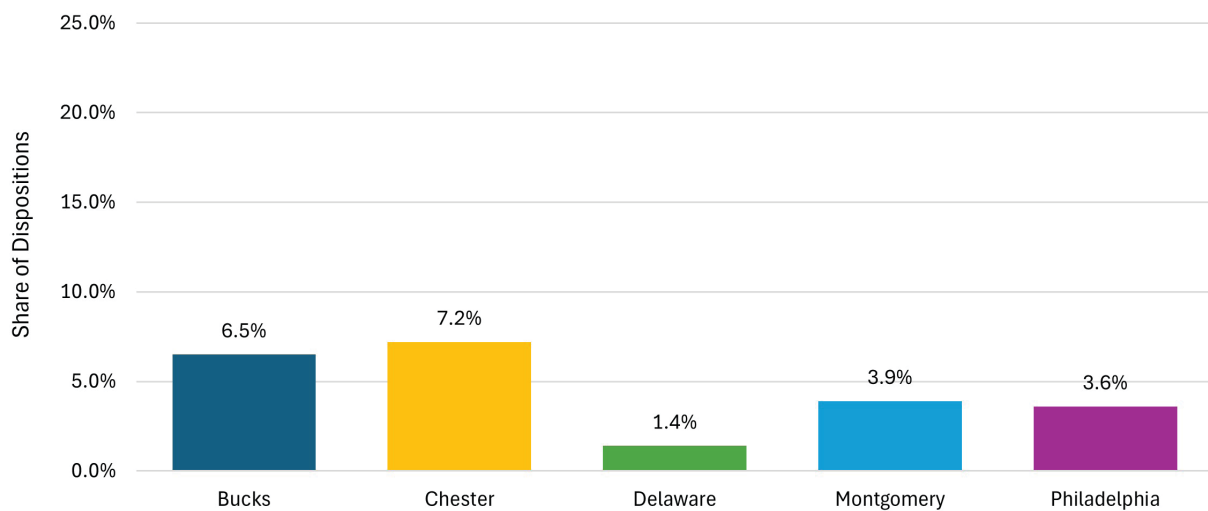
Chester County held 155 youth in secure detention (detention is short-term and utilized when the court determines a young person cannot remain home while awaiting juvenile court processes), the second lowest of the southeastern counties.¹⁶⁹

Violent crime caused by children in Chester County dropped by



Despite low detention numbers, Chester County had the highest share of placement dispositions at 7% (placement is a long-term out-of-home program, and disposition is the outcome after the court finds that a youth has committed an offense).¹⁷⁰ In 2023, the county diverted 67% of new allegation dispositions.¹⁷¹ There were 494 total delinquency dispositions and 49 juvenile justice facility placements. The remaining youth had their cases transferred to another court (e.g., dependency), charges dismissed or withdrawn, or received less restrictive interventions like probation.

Chester County has the Highest Share of Long-Term Juvenile Justice Placements in the Region ¹⁷²



Despite this progress, racial disproportionality is egregious in the juvenile justice system in Chester County and across Pennsylvania. In Chester County, Black youth are overrepresented in delinquency dispositions (39%) and detention admissions (53%), despite comprising just 6% of the county youth population.¹⁷³ Chester County is one of seven counties working to reduce racial disproportionality in juvenile justice through Georgetown University's Advancing Racial Justice in Youth Legal Systems program. The county team's project focused on pre-arrest diversion of youth who commit school-based offenses, placing a Diversion Coordinator in one school district, and the program launched this past school year (2023-2024).¹⁷⁴ While the grant for the school-based diversion program ends in June 2025, the county plans to continue funding the program going forward.¹⁷⁵

Local and County Recommendations: Chester County

In Early Childhood Education, Chester County must:

- Utilize county-level funds, in partnership with philanthropic organizations, to recruit and retain the early childhood workforce. Chester County led the way when it invested \$4 million in the Childcare Operation Recovery Grant Program, which provides operational grants to licensed child care programs. Similarly, York County's ECHO Innovation Award grant provides \$25,000 to \$50,000 to early childhood education programs to pilot innovative projects that expand the number of children and families served or increase the quality of care and education provided. Chester County should continue to invest in its early childhood workforce through grants to local ECE providers.
- Partner with philanthropic organizations to create a facilities fund for providers in order to increase the supply of high-quality early childhood programs. Similar to Philadelphia's Fund for Quality or the Harris County (Texas) SHINE Child Care Facilities Fund, these funds can provide financial assistance to providers for capital improvements that improve program quality.
- Provide forgivable start-up loans to providers opening child care programs, like the program offered by the BLOOM Business Empowerment Center, a program of the York County Economic Alliance, provides forgivable loans ranging from \$10,000 to \$40,000 to early childhood education start-up businesses.

To Improve K-12 Public Education Outcomes, Chester County School Districts must:

- Invest in evidence-based instructional programming and teacher training programs to target additional support towards students with acute academic needs and students living in poverty. This includes high-impact tutoring programs and parent engagement programs that train family members to support their children with coursework.
- Improve working conditions to retain educators and other school staff. This will look different in each school district and may include adjusting salaries, reducing class sizes and workloads, and creating opportunities for career advancement.

Local and County Recommendations: Chester County

For Improved Child Health Outcomes, Chester County must:

- Prioritize maintaining and communicating the Vaccines for Children (VFC) Program, which ensures equitable access to life-saving vaccines for children in need.
- Build upon the use of county mental health block grants and opioid settlement funds to invest in school-based behavioral health programs and support expansion of prevention and early intervention programs to meet the needs of students and families in the county.

To Improve Child Welfare, Chester County must:

- Continue, and expand where needed, the use of concrete and economic supports to prevent child welfare system involvement and placement in foster care. A growing body of evidence suggests that economic and concrete supports (e.g., food, transportation assistance) are key to the prevention of maltreatment and child welfare involvement.¹⁷⁶
- Increase focus on children and families lingering in the system and implement the array of services that would best promote their permanency, stability, and well-being.
- Explore the extent to which informal relative caregiving arrangements exist and ensure these caregivers have adequate resources to provide for children in their care.

To Improve the Juvenile Justice System, Chester County must:

- Continue, and expand where possible, efforts to divert young people from the formal legal system.
- Ensure a robust service array that includes non-secure options and evidence-based alternatives to incarceration for those young people who do enter the juvenile justice system.

For Improved Economic Mobility, Chester County must:

- Invest in high school and community college career relate learning programs that increase share of individuals with postsecondary training and occupational credentials.
- Identify gaps in access to post secondary training and high school preparation to supporting planning and programming for boosting social mobility.

State Recommendations

In Early Childhood Education, State Lawmakers must:

- Utilize county-level funds, in partnership with philanthropic organizations, to recruit and retain the early childhood workforce. Examples include Montgomery County, where \$4 million was allocated out of the Montgomery County Recovery Plan for the Childcare Operation Recovery Grant Program, which provides operational grants to licensed child care programs, and York County where the ECHO Innovation Award grants \$25,000 to \$50,000 to early childhood education programs to pilot innovative projects that expand the number of children and families served or increase the quality of care and education provided.
- Partner with philanthropic organizations to create a facilities fund for providers to increase the supply of high-quality early childhood programs. Like Philadelphia's Fund for Quality or the Harris County (Texas) SHINE Child Care Facilities Fund, these funds can provide financial assistance to providers for capital improvements that advance program quality.
- Provide forgivable start-up loans to providers opening child care programs, like the BLOOM Business Empowerment Center, a program of the York County Economic Alliance that provides forgivable loans ranging from \$10,000 to \$40,000 to early childhood education start-up businesses.
- Continue to expand access to high-quality child care by increasing the supply of high-quality slots. This can be done through both supporting wage increases to incentivize staff to return to the child care sector and increase the number of slots within high-quality programs. Policymakers can also further increase payments to high-quality programs, incentivizing providers to participate in the STARS program.
- Make child care more affordable for working families. Pennsylvania should increase eligibility for subsidy care by raising the household income threshold for families. Currently, families are only eligible for subsidies if they make up to 200% of the federal poverty level (FPL) and public pre-k (Pre-K Counts) if they make less than 300% of FPL. Some states have increased the threshold to as high as almost 400% of FPL, such as New Mexico.¹⁷⁷

State Recommendations

In Early Childhood Education, State Lawmakers must:

- Fully reimburse early childhood providers who receive child care subsidies for low-income children for the total cost of care. The current rate child care providers are paid is based on what families can afford, not what it costs to operate. This reform would allow providers to receive more reliable payments, budget effectively for staffing costs, and increase openings for more children.
- Create a refundable child tax credit. California, Colorado, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, and Vermont all provide refundable tax credits which address one of the primary drivers of child-well-being: family economic well-being.

State Recommendations

To Improve K-12 Public Education Outcomes, State Lawmakers must:

- Fully fund the remaining \$4 billion adequacy shortfall within four years. By the 2029-30 school year, every child attending public school must have their basic academic needs met and school districts must have stable funding to invest in their educator workforce and high-quality academic services.
- Direct the PA Department of Education to create a list of approved high-quality, evidence-based curricula that meets industry standards for English and math. Ensure that every school is using approved instructional materials to advance student learning and differentiate instruction based on their students' needs.
- Fully fund student teacher stipends to address the statewide educator shortage, remove financial barriers for prospective teachers, and incentivize prospective educators to complete their student teaching placement in schools with high teacher vacancy.
- Create a standard statewide cyber charter tuition payment system to align cyber student payment with student needs, the way all other public schools are funded, adjusted to reflect reduced costs needed for cyber instruction.
- Increase state funding for Career and Technical Education to increase enrollment and purchase modern materials and equipment that prepares students for today's industry standards.

State Recommendations

For Improved Child Health Outcomes, State Lawmakers must:

- Maximize Medicaid funding to substantially improve children’s mental health in Pennsylvania by:
 - Expanding the scope of reimbursable services to include prevention, early intervention, and less intensive services known as Tier One and Tier Two supports.
 - Broadening the types of providers certified and eligible to deliver services at each tier of intervention to increase access to diverse and culturally competent professionals.
 - Ensuring that the definition of medical necessity is fully applied to authorize mental health services and payments for all eligible children.
 - Integrating mental health services for parents and young children in pediatric primary care settings.
 - Centering schools as critical partners in mental health care systems and payor networks.
- Invest in children’s health by expanding health insurance coverage to the 4,320 uninsured children in Chester County.
- Protect Pennsylvania children by ending lead poisoning through guaranteeing all children get tested twice before the age of two for lead; and pass local ordinances that require all dwellings to undergo lead safety inspections.



State Recommendations

To Improve Child Welfare, State Lawmakers must:

- Expand access to community-based mental health and substance use services for both adults and their children. Ensuring families can receive these services in a timely manner will further reduce foster care placements and promote permanency for children, whether they are reunited with their parents or have a permanent home with a relative caregiver or adoptive parent.

To Improve the Juvenile Justice System, State Lawmakers must:

- Create a funding mechanism to support the implementation of new diversion programs or expansion of existing programs to serve more youth, accessible by county entities (including county departments of human services, district attorney's offices, and offices of juvenile probation).
- Pass legislation that requires diversion for certain low-level offenses, limits youth incarceration, and promotes the use of community-based alternatives to incarceration.

For Improved Economic Mobility, State Lawmakers must:

- Increase the minimum wage consistent with New York and New Jersey
- Pass Paid Family and Medical Leave. Sixty-six percent of Pennsylvania workers do not have access to paid family and medical leave. Passing the bill would be a game changer for families in Pennsylvania, improving family well-being and boosting the Commonwealth's economy.



Endnotes

Endnotes for this report can be found at:
www.childrenfirstpa.org/chescoendnotes2025

Children First, formerly known as Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY), serves as the leading child advocacy organization improving the lives and life chances of children in southeastern Pennsylvania.

Children First undertakes specific and focused projects in areas affecting the healthy growth and development of children, including child care, public education, child health, juvenile justice, and child welfare.

Through thoughtful and informed advocacy, community education, targeted service projects, and budget analysis, Children First watches out and speaks out for children and families.

Children First serves the families of Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery, and Philadelphia counties as well as children across the Commonwealth. We are a committed advocate and an independent watchdog for the well-being of all our children.

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Children First
990 Spring Garden Street
Suite 600
Philadelphia, PA 19123
215-563-5848