



A DECADE OF STALLED PROGRESS

*OPPORTUNITY STUNTED
FOR CHILDREN IN PHILADELPHIA*



***A Children First
Report on Philadelphia***

February 2025

**children
FIRST**
THE ADVOCATE FOR KIDS

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Introduction & Background

Philadelphia is home to over 324,000 children.¹ In fact, the ethnic and racial heritage of the city’s children changed significantly over the last decade. Far fewer Black and white children live in the city now while the number of Hispanic and Asian children grew.² Although still the largest demographic, there are roughly 24,400 fewer Black children in Philadelphia than in 2014 – a decrease from 47% to 42% of the child population.³ There are also nearly 4,000 fewer white children compared to ten years ago.

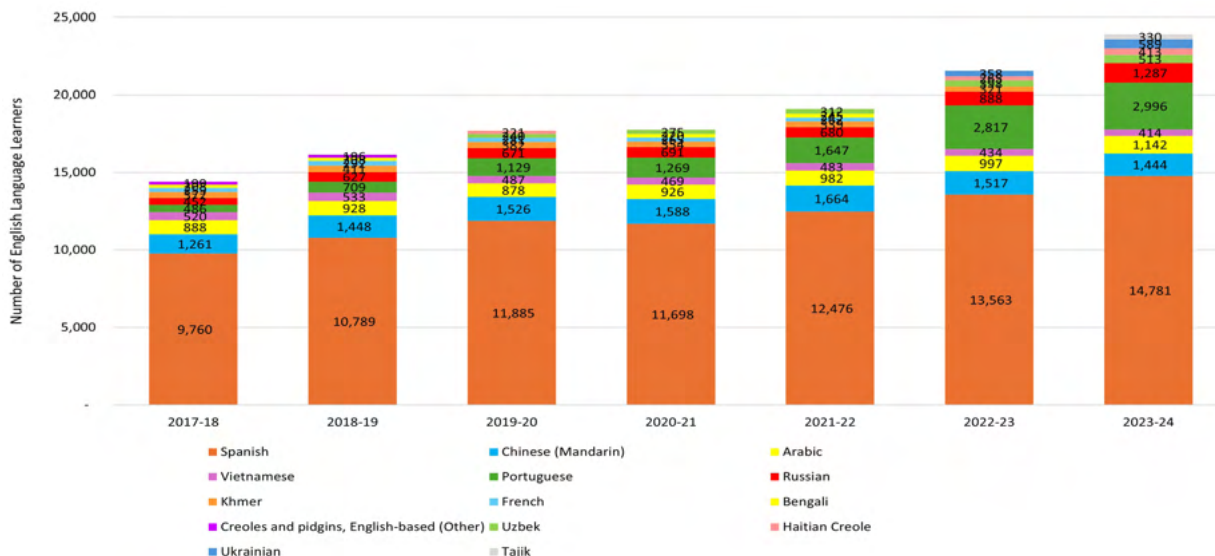
While about 1,800 more Asian children and 2,600 more multi-racial children call Philadelphia home compared to 10 years ago, Hispanic children account for the fastest growing subset of newcomers.⁴ There are almost 10,500 more Hispanic children in Philadelphia since 2014 – an increase from 20% to 24% of the child population.

The number of children whose first language is Spanish enrolled in public schools rose by 51% since the 2018 school year.⁵ In the 2024 school year, more than three out of ten Hispanic students were enrolled as English Language Learners, expanding the need for language-appropriate materials and tutoring opportunities in Philadelphia public schools.⁶

ECONOMIC FAST FACTS FOR PHILADELPHIA

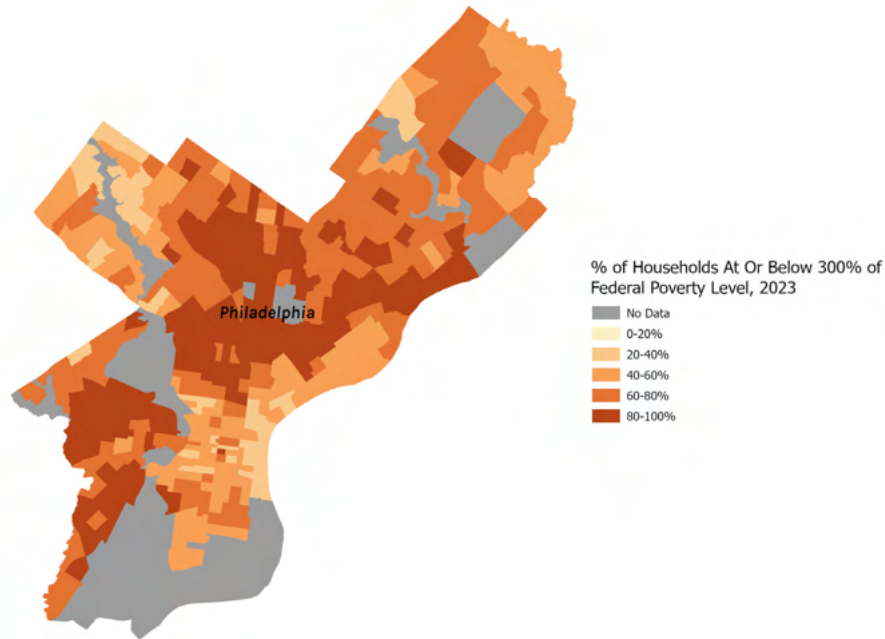
- 152,000 children live in families earning too little to meet their needs**
- 47% of all families with children are earning less than needed**
- Families with two children need to earn \$74,016 or much more if they have child care costs**
- 30% of families report being food insecure**
- Families earning the least gained only \$228 in purchasing power over the last decade**

The Cultural Heritage of Children in Philadelphia has Become More Diverse from 2017-2018 to 2023-2024 ⁷



Noteably, Hispanic children come from a variety of heritages depending on their parents' country of origin and ethnicity. The shifting diversity of the city requires greater cultural competence among child serving institutions for children to succeed.

Children from Low-Wealth Families are Concentrated in Communities Across Philadelphia ⁸





The Official Poverty Measure Masks Real Economic Hardship

While the demographic profile of the children has shifted, family poverty has not. Nearly half of the city's children are living in families that can't afford to meet their needs without going into debt or going without essentials.⁹ While the lack of family resources impact the prospects of children in every neighborhood of Philadelphia, at least 152,000 children are growing up in low-wealth families mostly in neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty.^{10,11}

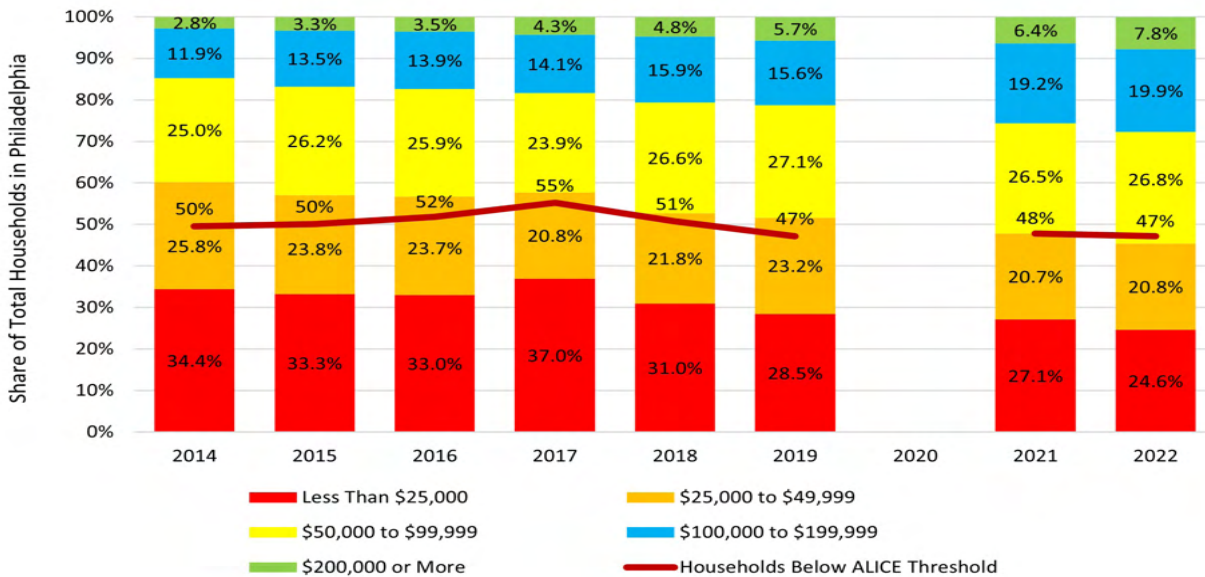
Too many families of all races and ethnicities are facing economic hardship in Philadelphia. The method used by the U.S. Bureau of the Census to measure poverty, while useful, is not robust enough to fully describe the relationship between the income earned by a household and the cost of living for that 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, healthcare, technology, and taxes) for every county in the country.¹² 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.¹³

This robust ALICE measure finds that a family of two adults and two children in Philadelphia would need to make \$74,016, or more than two times the official federal poverty measure, to afford the basics of rent, food, transportation, health insurance, and other essentials.¹⁴ If the family needs child care so the parents can work, their earnings would need to rise to \$92,208.


 The average family in Philadelphia would need to make \$74,016 to afford the basics.


In the last decade, the share of households with children earning too little to meet their needs fluctuated from a high of 55% in 2017 to a low of 47% in 2022, the latest year the data is available.¹⁵ As a result, it is not a surprise that three out of 10 families report being food insecure in 2022, a rate on-par with the food insecurity rates during the COVID pandemic.¹⁶

Nearly 50% of Families with Children are Below the ALICE Threshold in Philadelphia ¹⁷



To make matters worse, families are increasingly turning to public benefits to meet their basic needs. Approximately 170,688 children relied on SNAP benefits to avoid hunger, an increase of over 7,500 children since 2019.¹⁸ Similarly, the number of children benefitting from WIC was at a five-year high of 31,619 in 2024.¹⁹

Meanwhile, the number of homeless children nearly doubled, reaching a high of 5,799 in the 2024 school year in a period of ostensibly robust income growth in the city.²⁰ 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.²¹

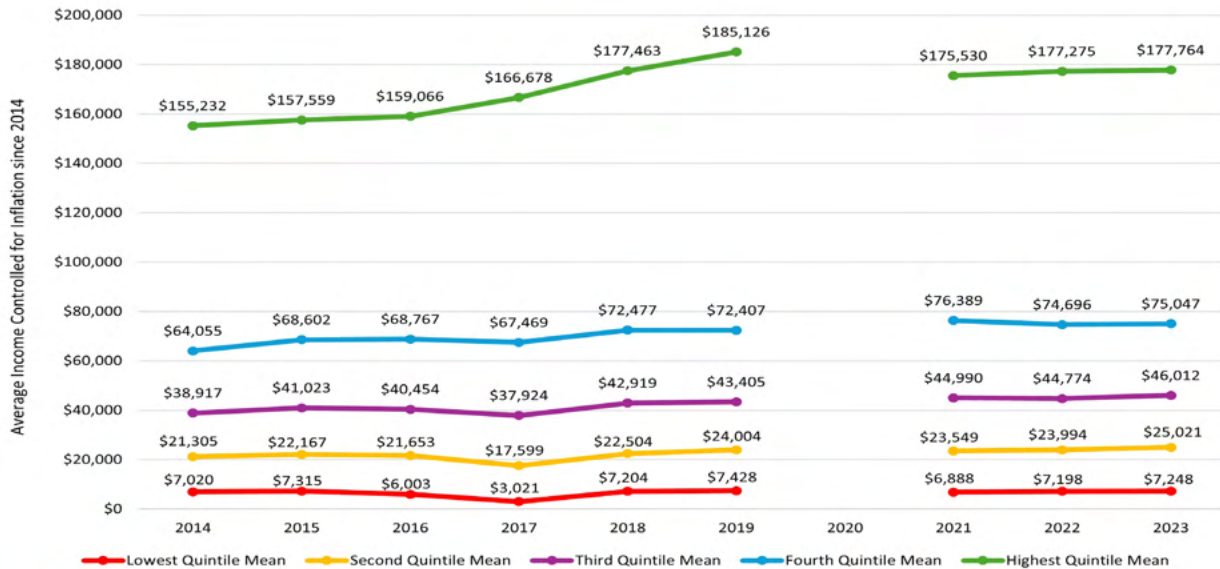
Wage Growth Fails to Outpace Inflation

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 city. A majority (57%) of Philadelphians now earn over \$50,000 compared to just 40% a decade ago, and the number of people earning over \$200,000 a year nearly tripled.²²

Although most working adults in Philadelphia earned more over the decade, generally any financial boost was wiped out by rapidly increased costs for basic goods and services. After accounting for inflation, the poorest 20% of city residents experienced a net growth of only \$228 in annual purchasing power in the last decade despite their incomes increasing by 35% in that same period.²³ The next lowest 20% income group saw a \$3,716 boost in annual purchasing power despite wage growth increasing over \$11,000 within the decade. In contrast, the top 20% saw their purchasing power grow by \$22,532 in the same period.²⁴

Suffice to say that once adjusting for inflation, the share of children living in economically stressed households has not budged in the last decade even as 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.

Income Growth Fails to Keep Pace with Inflation in Philadelphia ²⁵



Educational Attainment Challenges Hold Back Economic Prospects

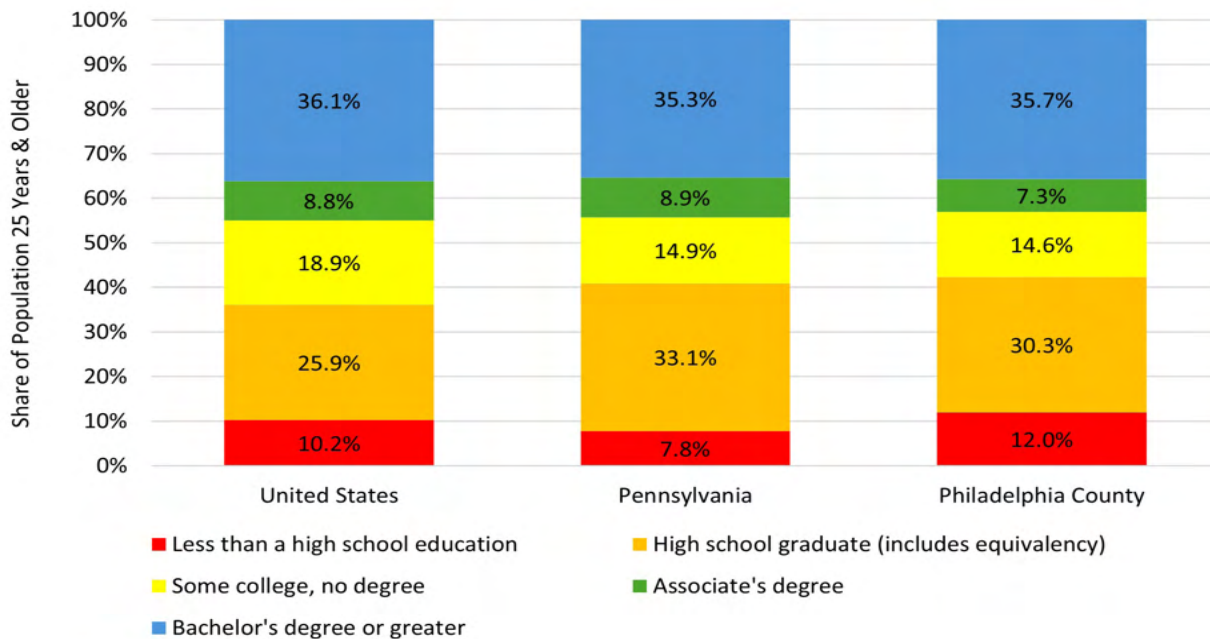
National data demonstrates that adults can substantially boost their earnings capacity if they have some post-secondary training or education.²⁶ In Philadelphia, the earnings of families where at least one adult completed some college were 7% higher than households where at least one adult had just a high school diploma.²⁷ Where a caregiver had a four-year degree their earning capacity rose by nearly 58% compared to households where at least one caregiver only had a high school diploma.

Fortunately, more Philadelphia children are likely to be raised by a parent with at least some college or post-secondary education compared to 10 years ago. Almost 58% of Philadelphia adults now have some post high school education or training compared to 48% ten years ago.²⁸ That is about 122,000 more adults with at least some form of a post-secondary education. Another promising trend is the number of adults with a high school degree which rose by nearly six percentage points, or about 87,700 more adults with a diploma.²⁹

Most promising is the increase of adults with four or more years of college, up nearly ten percentage points, or 113,600 more adults in the decade.³⁰

As of 2023, Philadelphia adults are less likely to have some form of a post-secondary education than all adults across the state and nation.³¹ Despite this, a marginally larger share of adults in Philadelphia have a four-year college degree or greater compared to all adults across Pennsylvania.

The Share of Philadelphia Adults with Undergraduate or Post-Graduate Degrees is On-Par with the National Share³²



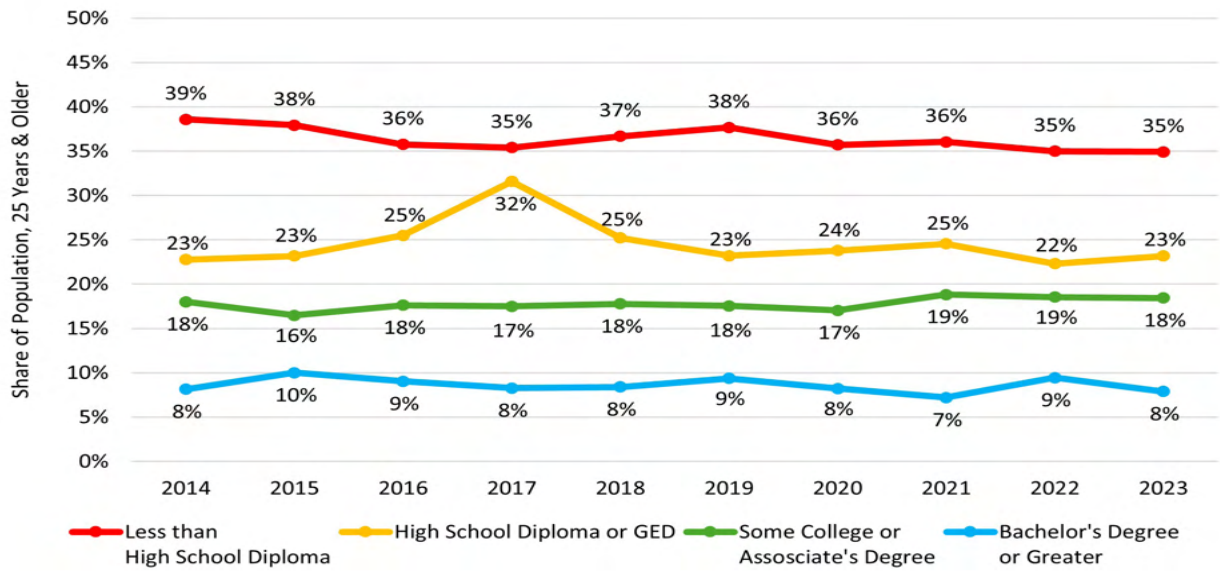
This positive trend in the educational attainment of Philadelphia’s adults is a recent occurrence that unfolded in the years following the pandemic and may explain the jump in the average median income from approximately \$39,000 to \$60,300 from 2014 to 2023.³³

With the rising demands of the labor market, which is increasingly rewarding job seekers with some college education, too many adults with just a high school diploma or less live in poverty. This data suggests that real barriers to secondary and post-secondary education pathways persist, limiting the capacity of approximately 118,400 adults in Philadelphia to rise into the middle class based on the latest data from 2023.³⁴

It also may explain why the city’s unemployment rate has trended consistently higher than the state and national unemployment rates for the last ten years.³⁵

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 Philadelphia by 20%³⁶



The barriers to post-secondary training may also be at the root of the city’s child poverty rate which was 25% compared to the poverty rate for all city adults at 20% as of 2023.³⁷

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. This temporary expanded and refundable child tax credit, issued during the pandemic, significantly reduced child poverty by 43% nationwide.³⁸

In Pennsylvania, the impact was even greater, with child poverty rates reduced by 46%.³⁹ In Philadelphia, families across the board benefited from \$521 million through this refundable tax policy.⁴⁰ Philadelphia families also benefited from \$71 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.⁴¹

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 27,545 Philadelphia families.⁴²

In addition to the decade-long barriers to upward mobility for the lowest income families in the city, the downward trends in educational attainment and healthcare 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.



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



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.⁴³ This dysfunction in the child care sector has serious implications for Philadelphia'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, 12,623 Philadelphia 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.⁴⁴ 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 PHILADELPHIA

93,080 children under the age of 5 years old

35,720 children eligible for Child Care Works (child care subsidy)

58% of eligible children are NOT enrolled in Child Care Works

31% of child care providers are STAR 3 or 4 (high-quality) and they serve almost half of eligible children

25,210 children eligible for high-quality publicly funded pre-k⁴⁵

25% of eligible children are NOT enrolled in publicly funded pre-k

453 unfilled staff positions in child care programs

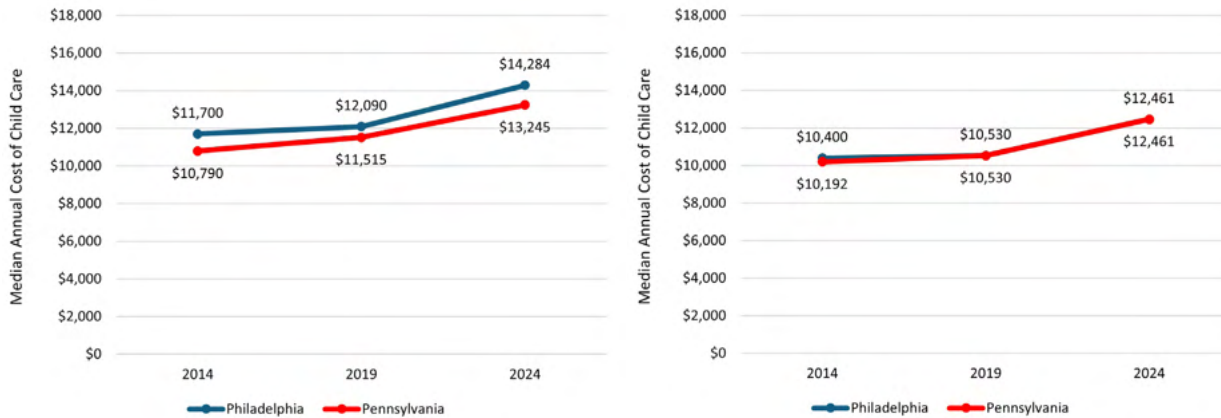
3,855 children could be served if child care programs were fully staffed

Without Help, Families Really Struggle to Cover Costs

Philadelphia is home to 93,080 children under the age of five, and their parents face steep costs when it comes to early education and care. Philadelphia residents pay \$1,039 more for infant care than the rest of Pennsylvania and pay the same costs as the rest of the state for toddler care. Little progress has been made to bring those costs down. In fact, infant care costs in Philadelphia increased by 22% and toddler care rose 20% from 2013 to 2024. In 2024, the average family spent almost 24% of their household budget on infant care, more than three times the federal recommendation of 7%.

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 58% of eligible children are not enrolled in Child Care Works. 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.

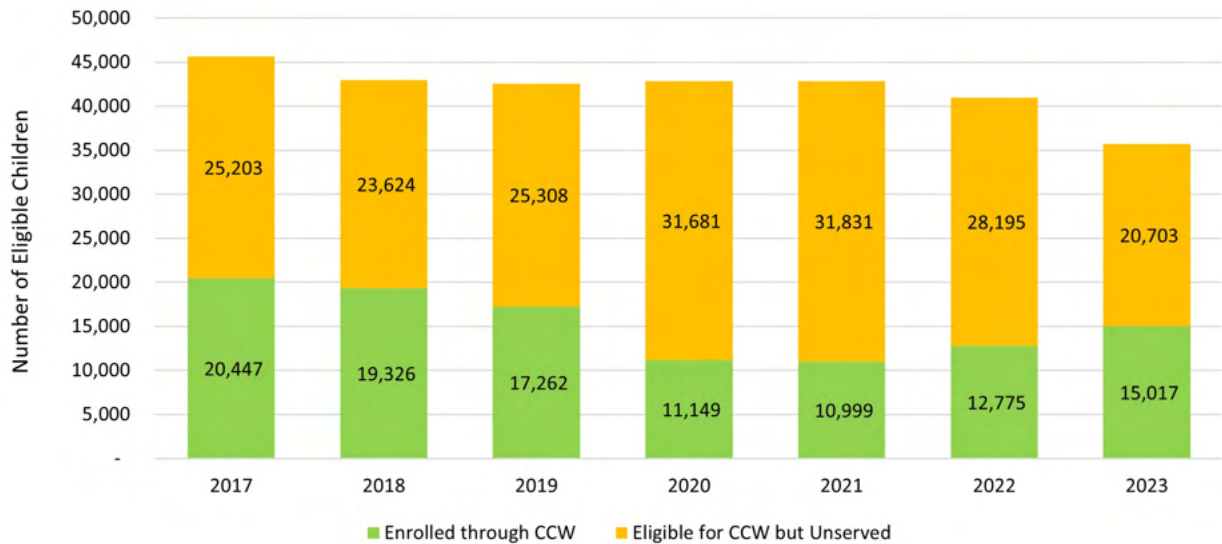
The Median Annual Cost of Infant or Toddler Child Care in Philadelphia is on Par with the Average Statewide Cost⁵⁰



Staffing Shortages Cut Supply

Even though the number of providers in Philadelphia has remained stable, chronic staffing shortages have forced providers to close classrooms and turn away 3,855 children in 2024, a number equivalent to eight entire public elementary schools.⁵¹ 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.

58% of Eligible Children in Philadelphia Cannot Enroll in Subsidized Care Because of Persistent Staffing and Provider Shortages⁵²



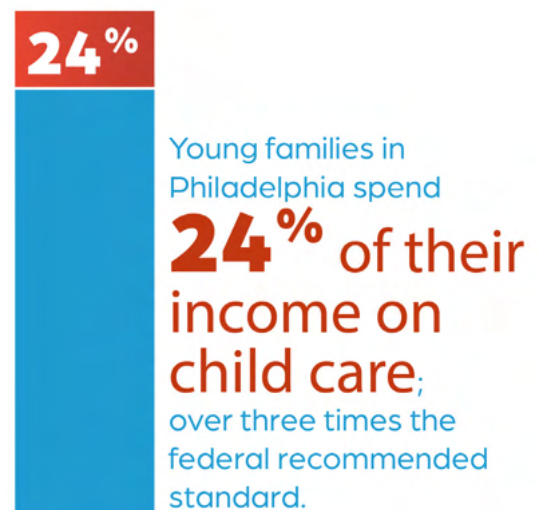
Low salaries are the primary driving factor for the staffing shortage. The average pay for child care staff in Philadelphia was \$34,243 in 2023, so close to the federal poverty line that, if they reside in a family of four, they could qualify for a child care subsidy themselves.⁵³

Their counterparts in the Philadelphia School District make more at \$54,146.⁵⁴ Even retail workers make more money than child care staff, approximately \$1,929 more a year.⁵⁵ It is no surprise then, that providers have struggled to compete with other sectors to hire and retain staff.

Philadelphia Takes the Lead on Quality & Pre-K

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.



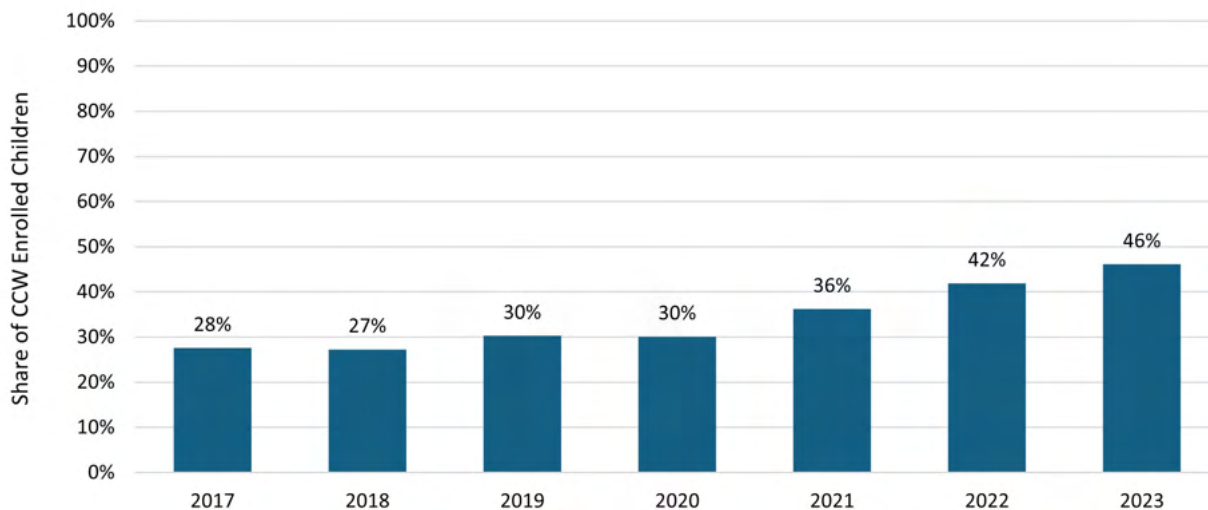
High-quality early childhood education also supports the brain development of young children during a particularly sensitive period of growth, and also contributes to resiliency, which increases the likelihood of children being able to rebound from traumatic events. In essence, high-quality early learning programs are the foundation for success in school and career.



The Pennsylvania STARS program is a state rating system that uses multiple indicators to measure quality, 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.

In stark contrast to the other suburban counties, the City of Philadelphia and key stakeholders began a ten-year effort to boost the quality of and access to pre-k for three- and four-year-olds. These investments and efforts continue today. The launch of PHLpreK, backed by the sweetened beverage tax, now serves over 5,200 children in programs that are rated either high-quality or, with the city’s support, are actively working to become rated high-quality.⁵⁶

The Share of Low-Income Children Under 5 in High-Quality Child Care Programs Increased Significantly, Reaching Nearly Half of All Children in Philadelphia in 2023 ⁵⁹



Because PHLpreK admits families regardless of their level of income, the socioeconomic diversity of PHLpreK classrooms is unique. The additional city funding also boosted the share of all eligible children enrolled in high-quality pre-k to 75%, surpassing the pre-k enrollment rate of every other county in the state, including Pittsburgh.⁵⁷

In addition, the city collaborated with the state's Office of Child Development and Early Learning to work intentionally to boost the quality of child care programs. In 2017, only 28% of children were enrolled in high-quality child care.⁵⁸ By 2023, that share jumped to almost half of all eligible children.



K-12 Education

Over the last 10 years, Philadelphia’s school district has struggled to recover from the devastating \$1 billion cut to schools made by the state that first hit schools in the 2012 school year. However, in the last ten years, the District received annual increases in state funds that finally restored the state funding to the level it was before the harsh state reduction in 2018. Since then, substantial state increases are giving the district the resources to put new staff and academic supports in place to boost student performance.

COVID Drop in Student Achievement Persists

Within the last decade, the pandemic forced schools to close in 2020 and students across the city experienced major learning loss that is reflected in dropped test scores.⁶² Philadelphia’s students are gaining back some lost ground, but the city’s elementary students are still not back to where they were before the pandemic.

Current city achievement levels show that just over one third of Philadelphia’s third graders can read on grade level and only one in six eighth graders are proficient in math – both major predictors of future success.⁶³

Of all the southeastern counties, Philadelphia lags the furthest behind the state in student achievement.⁶⁴

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.^{65,66,67} In Philadelphia’s traditional public elementary schools and charter schools, 65% of all third graders (8,044 students) cannot read proficiently – that’s about the size of Temple and Penn’s freshman classes combined!⁶⁹

EDUCATION FAST FACTS FOR PHILADELPHIA

119,826 students in traditional public schools in the School District of Philadelphia, an increase of 1,841 since the 2023-24 school year ⁶⁰

65,061 students in 91 brick and mortar charter schools with tuition costs totaling \$903 million ⁶¹

13,632 students in 13 cyber charter schools with tuition costs totaling \$214 million

14% of students are English Language Learners

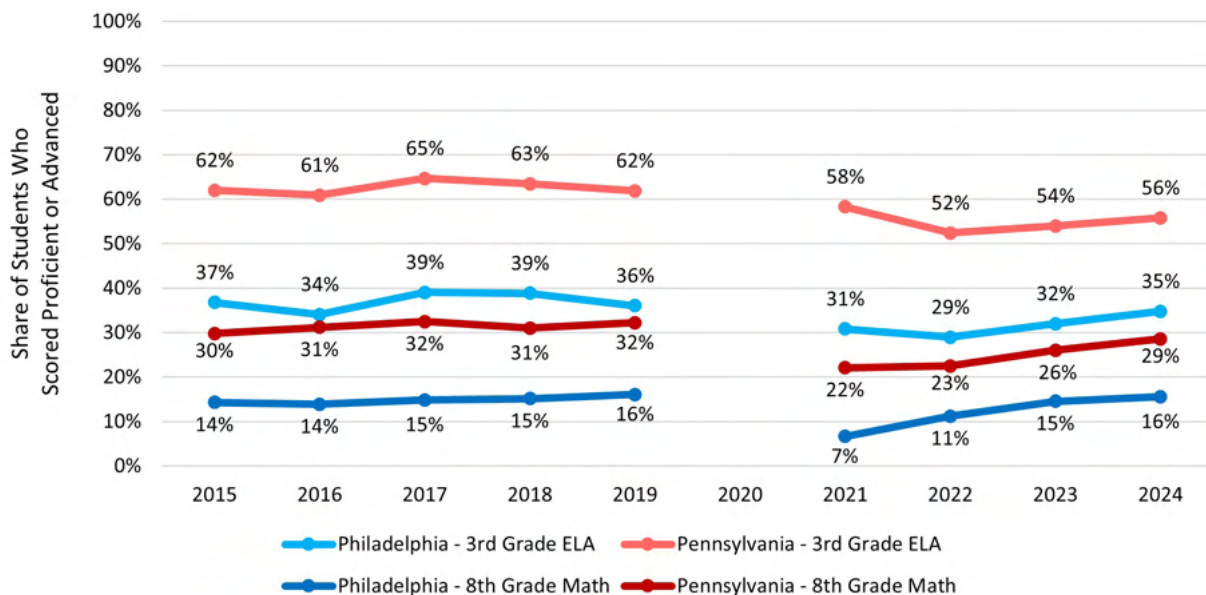
6% of high school students are enrolled in career and technical education (CTE)

The School District of Philadelphia and all charter schools that Philadelphia students attend have a remaining state funding adequacy gap of \$1.1 billion

Only 35% of third graders can pass English assessments

Only 16% of eighth graders can pass math assessments

Student Performance Suffered and is Still Recovering from COVID Learning Disruptions⁷⁰



While no racial group has yet recovered to pre-pandemic levels, Black and Hispanic third graders are the furthest behind with just over one quarter reading at or above grade level.⁷¹

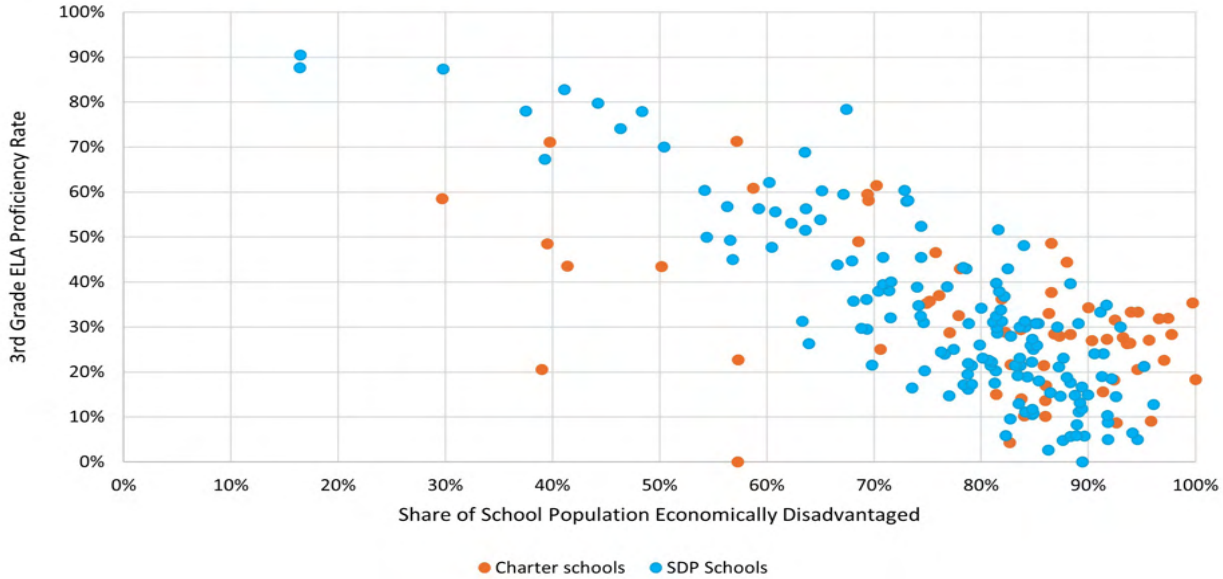
The schools serving the city's highest-poverty communities have the fewest students who can pass the reading test.⁷² In 120 of the 121 elementary schools where 80% or more of students live in poverty, less than half of third graders are reading on grade level. Meanwhile, in the two traditional public elementary schools with the highest income rates, Greenfield and Meredith, almost all third graders can pass the reading test.

The district's school-by-school performance often correlates with family income, which demonstrates that more must be done to boost family income and more resources are needed in schools to compensate for the impact of poverty on learning. Students from low-income families also have lagged behind their peers in third grade reading for the last 10 years.⁷³

Low-income students have made consistent progress year over year since schools reopened after the COVID pandemic. Unfortunately, the gap is slightly wider now than it was before the pandemic.

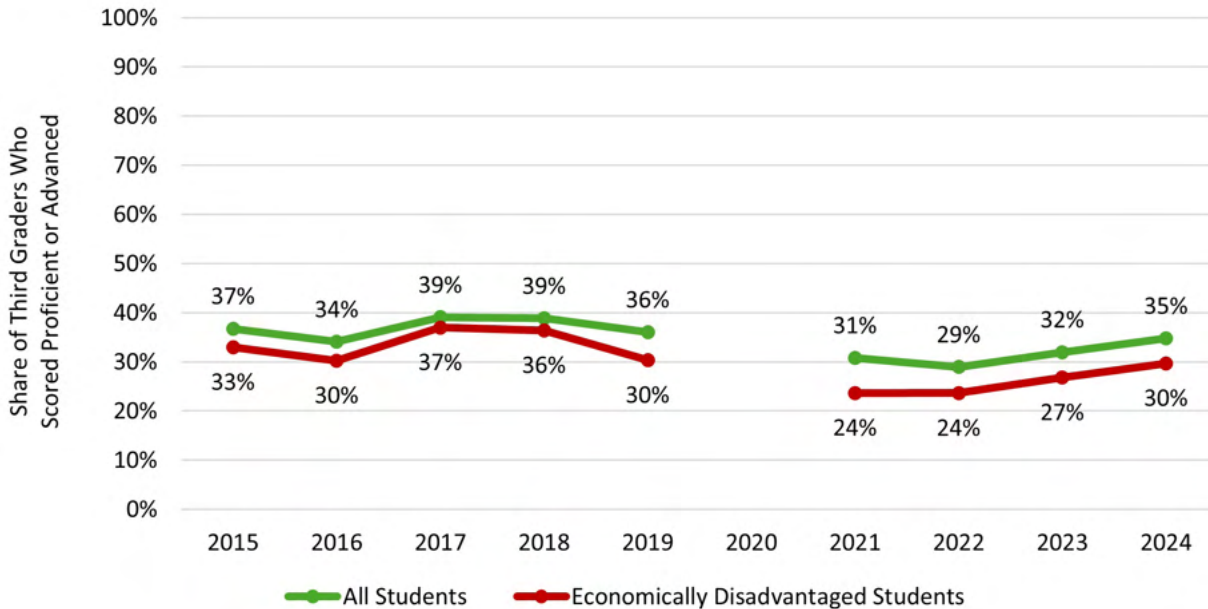


Fewer Third Graders in Philadelphia Can Read Proficiently in High-Poverty Charter and District Schools ⁷⁴



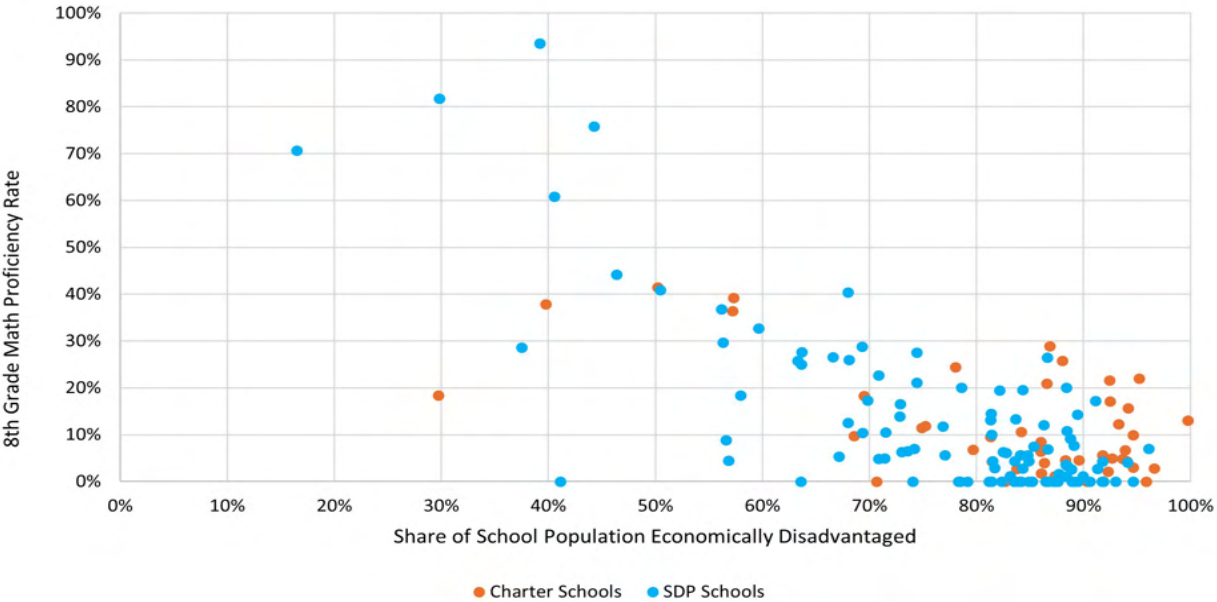
In some schools, funding constraints leave students without much-needed literacy support, like reading specialists, targeted tutoring, and small-group instruction. The evidence-based “science of reading” approach offers instructional practices that teachers can use to support all learners. Training teachers and providing them updated curriculum can transform learning outcomes, and it has worked in states like Mississippi.⁷⁵

Third Graders from Low-Income Backgrounds are Further Behind Overall Students in Reading than Before the Pandemic ⁷⁶



In the 2024-25 school year, the School District of Philadelphia adopted a new curriculum for grades K-8 that is aligned with the science of reading, called Expeditionary Learning. However, curriculum change is not a quick fix. It is only successful when teachers participate in the process and school districts provide extensive coaching, parental guidance, and the classroom supplies needed to help teachers implement it well.⁷⁷ Some Philadelphia teachers say that they need more support to use the new curriculum effectively and some teachers report that the classroom supplies needed for instruction are not provided.^{78,79} Literacy advocates continue to push for effective training and use of the new curriculum to drive student learning.

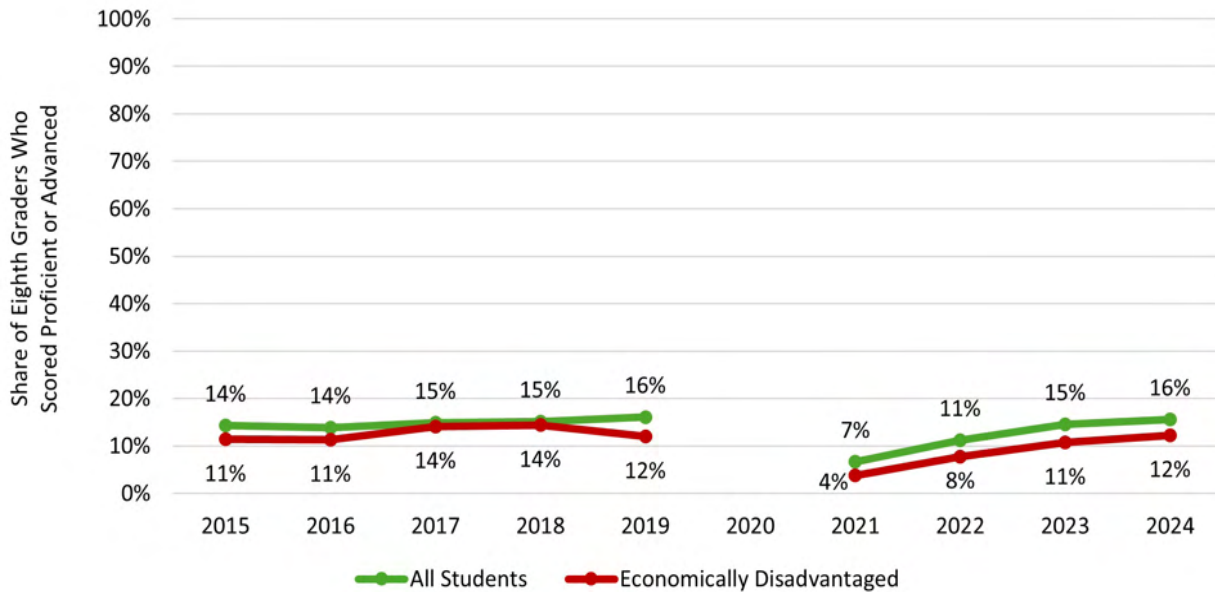
Eight Grade Math Proficiency is at a Crisis Point in Philadelphia Schools with High Poverty Rates ⁸⁰



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.⁸¹ Eighth grade math proficiency is at a crisis point in the Philadelphia middle schools that serve large proportions of families living in poverty.

There are 87 traditional public schools and 44 charter schools where less than 16% of eighth graders can pass the math proficiency test and three quarters of them serve student populations where over 70% of students live in poverty.⁸² Even in the schools with the highest math proficiency levels, only one of them, Masterman, has over 90% of eighth graders who can pass the test.

Eighth Graders from Low-Income Backgrounds Came Close to Closing the Math Gap Before the Pandemic ⁸³



One bright spot is that Hispanic students have surpassed their pre-pandemic math achievement levels.⁸⁴ While all students, including economically disadvantaged students, are making steady progress in math, most eighth graders remain behind. Black and Hispanic students’ math proficiency lags the most.

Philadelphia adopted a new math curriculum called Imagine Learning – Illustrative Math in the 2023-24 school year, which may be responsible for students rebounding from pandemic-related math learning loss faster than reading learning loss.⁸⁵ The district continued to support curriculum implementation by purchasing manipulative tools needed for instruction.⁸⁶ While the district works to improve math outcomes, the ongoing math achievement crisis puts Philadelphia students at a disadvantage in college and career.

Philadelphia’s Local Contributions to Schools have Increased but the School District Remains Underfunded Due to the State’s Adequacy Gap

Unlike the other 499 school districts in Pennsylvania, the School District of Philadelphia’s school board cannot impose local taxes to generate revenue for the school district. Instead, all taxing power for the school district is vested with Philadelphia City Council. This unique arrangement is a function of the agreement struck with the state legislature when Philadelphia was granted Home Rule powers in 1951.

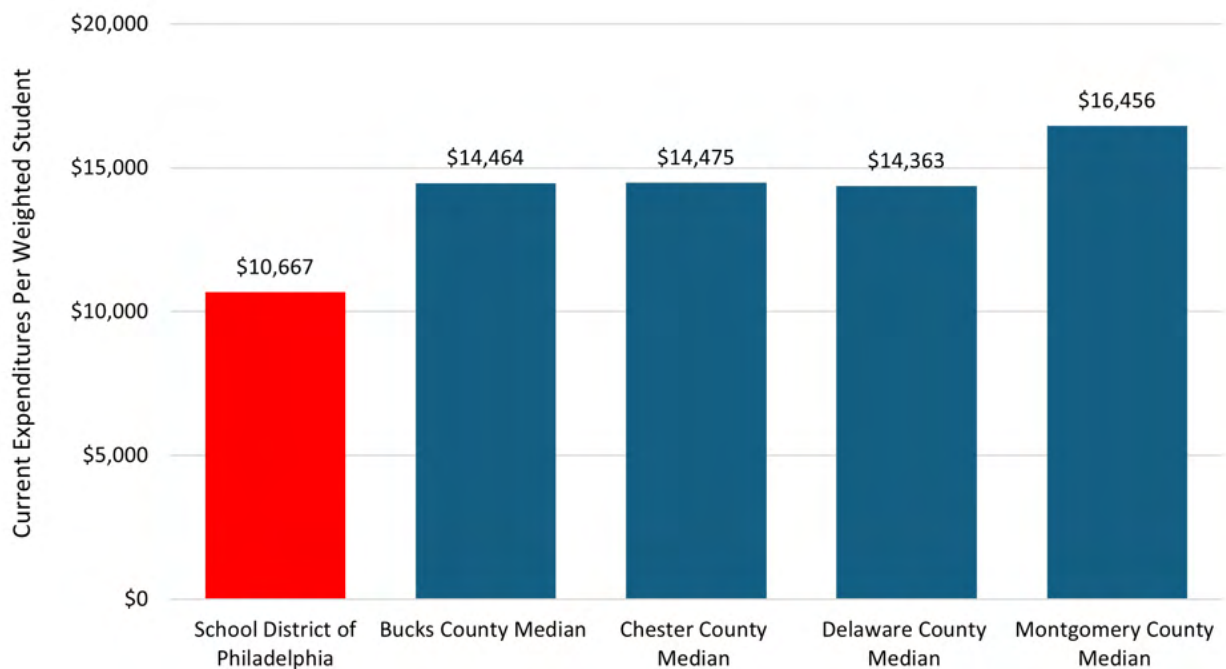
City Council imposes property taxes as well as other forms of local taxes and determines what share of the tax revenue will be directed to the school district. The school district then passes a share of the funds to charter schools. Locally generated revenues currently account for 50% of the school district’s budget. At that level of funding, the school district is ranked 165th with respect to local tax effort of all 500 school districts.⁸⁷ (Tax effort is calculated by the state as a ratio of all local tax related revenues for the schools compared to median income.)

Mayor Cherelle Parker campaigned on boosting local school funding by increasing the share of local property taxes allocated to the school district. In her first year, the Mayor secured council approval to boost the share of these taxes for the district from 55% to 56% or approximately \$18 million more in the 2024-2025 school year.⁸⁸

While the city works to raise sufficient local revenue for the city’s schools, the state’s contribution to the school system has been inadequate for decades. The School District of Philadelphia spends less per student than most districts in the surrounding counties, largely due to state underfunding.⁸⁹ At \$10,667 per student, SDP spends the second lowest amount per student out of all southeastern PA school districts after Chester-Upland School District.

Spending less per student means that students have less support staff, larger class sizes, fewer updated classrooms and school facilities, and more challenging school conditions compared to their peers in neighboring districts.

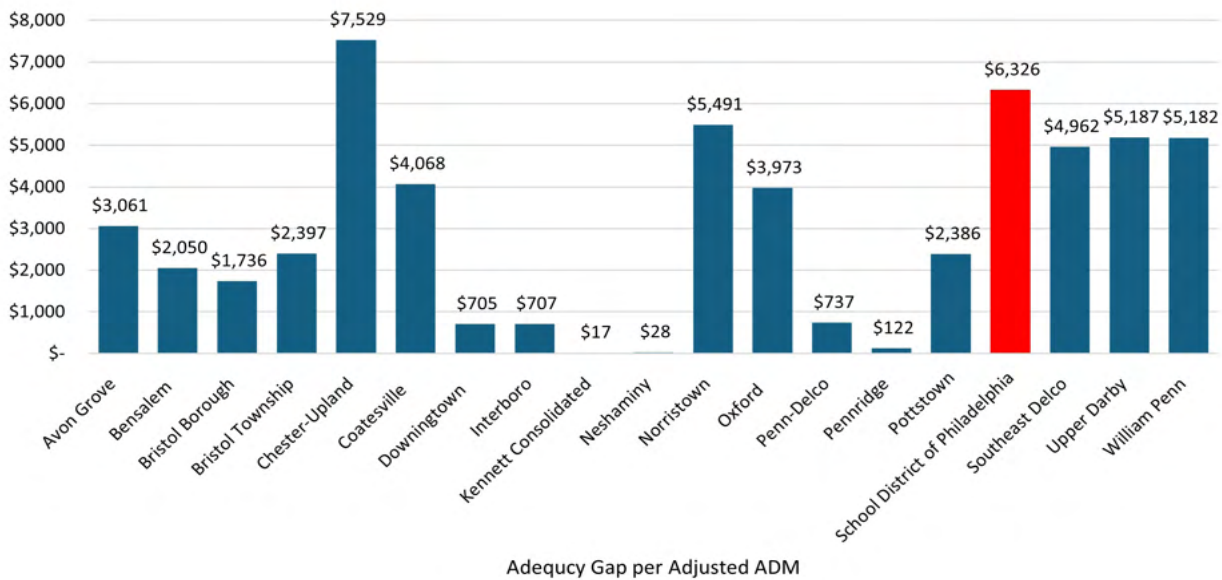
Philadelphia Spends Less Per Student than All Other Surrounding Counties⁹⁰



Persistent underfunding of schools is a Pennsylvania problem, not just a Philadelphia 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.⁹¹

Fortunately, in 2023, the Commonwealth Court concluded that the state funding of schools violated the state constitution and directed the legislature to remedy the violation.⁹² In adopting a new state formula, the legislature determined that the state’s school funding shortfall was \$4.5 billion. Philadelphia’s total shortfall was measured at over \$1.25 billion, or an additional \$6,326 per student.⁹³

Philadelphia and 18 Suburban School Districts Need Moore Funding to Adequately Educate Each Student ⁹⁴



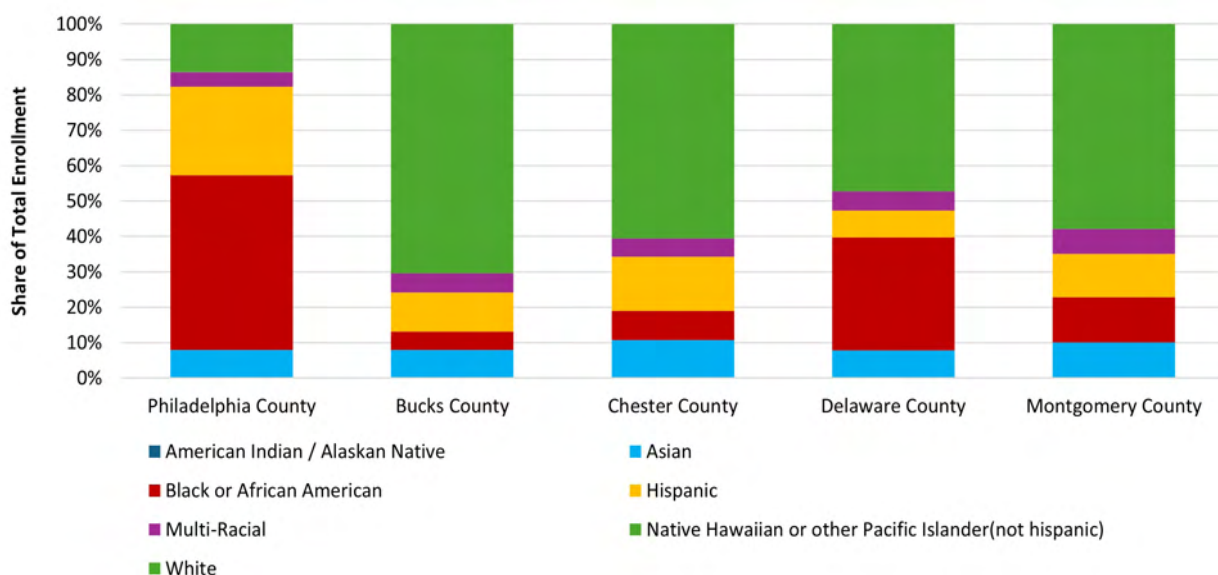
Under the leadership of Governor Josh Shapiro, the 2024 state budget introduced \$1.1 billion in new state funds, the largest increase in Pennsylvania history.⁹⁵ Half of the new state dollars in 2024 funded adequacy efforts, filling the first 11% of that \$4.5 billion gap. The new adequacy funds must be used to improve student learning and must be approved by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. There is currently no timeline for when the state will release the remainder of the adequacy funds.

In Philadelphia, adequacy funds will reach every student in traditional public and charter schools. The first \$137 million in adequacy funds was released in 2024 leaving a \$1.1 billion remaining adequacy gap to fill.⁹⁶

Philadelphia Educates Many More Students of Color and Low-Income Students than the Surrounding Counties

Because Pennsylvania communities' wealth is often correlated with its racial makeup, the school districts with the highest numbers of Black and Hispanic students have the least funding to educate their students. Students of color and those from low-income families are more concentrated in Philadelphia than in the surrounding counties.

Philadelphia Schools are More Racially Diverse than the Surrounding Counties⁹⁷



Approximately 110,852 public school students or 54% of the city's student body, live in poverty — enough to almost fill Citizens Bank Park AND the Lincoln Financial Field.^{98,99} Over a third of Philadelphia students live in “acute poverty,” which the state defines as being under 99% of the federal poverty line.¹⁰⁰ This classifies Philadelphia as one of only 48 school districts in the state that meets the definition of “concentrated poverty,” which poses additional challenges for learning.¹⁰¹

Fortunately, student poverty trends are moving in the right direction. The number and percent of students living in poverty in Philadelphia decreased over the last nine years by over 10,000 students or 8.4%.¹⁰² Still, the continued depth and breadth of poverty in the city requires a robust and dedicated plan to educate these students who are the city's future.

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.¹⁰³ Although the FY2024 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.¹⁰⁴

As a result, a little more than 6% of Philadelphia high school students (3,512) are enrolled as CTE concentrators.¹⁰⁵ (A CTE concentrator is a student who successfully completes at least half of their CTE coursework.) Philadelphia has the second highest share of CTE concentrators out of the five southeastern Pennsylvania counties but is still lower than the 7% rate of the overall state. The number of Philadelphia students in these promising programs fluctuated but virtually saw no change in the last decade.

Only **6% of high school students** in Philadelphia are enrolled in Career/Technical Education programs.



Enrolled in Career/Technical Education

The good news is that more than three-fourths (79%) of Philadelphia CTE concentrators come from low-income families, demonstrating student demand for the programs and the desire of parents to do what they can to help their children graduate high school and enter the middle class.^{106,107} Another indicator of the promise of CTE for students is the fact that these Philadelphia students are outperforming their peers across the state. Nearly 43% of the city's CTE students pursued a post-secondary education, compared to a third of CTE students statewide.¹⁰⁸

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).¹⁰⁹ 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.¹¹⁰

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.¹¹¹

Philadelphia has a severe teacher shortage and needs 2,015 new teachers to meet all students' needs.¹¹² The supply of teachers decreased 31% in the past 10 years, and 19% of teachers are currently on emergency permits, with another 16% teaching out of the area they were certified in, according to the PA Needs Teachers campaign.

Large numbers of vacancies are a consequence of inadequate funding and pose a major barrier to student success.

Teachers' experience levels also vary between Philadelphia and surrounding regions. Classroom teachers in the School District of Philadelphia had 13.5 years of experience on average, while experience levels of Philadelphia charter schools varied widely.¹¹³ In the nearby suburban districts of Lower Merion, Radnor, and Council Rock, teachers held over 17 years of experience on average.

To attract new teachers and build up the teacher pipeline, school districts need to offer competitive starting salaries. On a recent citywide teacher survey conducted by the Philadelphia Citywide Talent Coalition and Elevate 215, increases in salary were rated as the number one financial incentive across all demographics and experience levels.¹¹⁴ The School District of Philadelphia raised teacher salaries by 5% in 2024, but there are still wide gaps in starting pay ranging from \$54,156 at the School District of Philadelphia to \$63,750 in nearby Wallingford-Swarthmore and \$63,858 in Upper Dublin.^{115,116,117} Differences in salaries make it much more attractive for teachers to choose wealthier school districts and exacerbate educational inequities.

Philadelphia is also losing Black teachers at alarming rates. Between 2001 – 2021, the number of Black teachers in Philadelphia schools decreased by almost 1,200 according to a Research for Action report.¹¹⁸

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.

The School District of Philadelphia pays more than \$214 million to cyber charter schools where student achievement is far worse than students at traditional public schools.¹¹⁹

The district paid an additional \$249 million more to brick and mortar charter schools in the same period.¹²⁰

Cyber charter school payments in Philadelphia rose by

219%

in eight years,

reaching

\$214 million



Child Health

Philadelphia faces significant health disparities, particularly for children in marginalized communities. Many children suffer from the impacts of lead exposure, which contributes to developmental delays and higher rates of asthma. Asthma-related hospitalizations remain a concern, especially among Black children, with poor housing conditions like lead paint and poor air quality exacerbating the issue. Addressing these environmental factors, including improving housing quality, is a critical part of reducing health risks for children.^{121,122,123}

The city's health system also faces challenges in early childhood services, including data gaps on developmental milestones and early intervention (EI) referrals. Some children who could benefit from EI are not being identified or enrolled, particularly in under-served communities. There is a strong call for better tracking of referrals and outreach, ensuring that all children who need EI services receive them. Parental involvement in EI programs is crucial, but many families face barriers such as language difficulties and lack of awareness about services. These challenges are particularly pronounced for immigrant families, many of whom struggle to navigate the system due to language barriers, fear of legal repercussions, and difficulty accessing Medicaid.¹²⁴

Mental health concerns are another growing issue in Philadelphia, with a marked increase in depression and anxiety among youth.¹²⁵ Recent surveys show that 48% of students feel depressed or sad most days, and 24% report having considered suicide.¹²⁶

While some progress has been made in increasing school-based mental health services, long wait times and staffing shortages continue to hinder access. Mental health support remains insufficient to meet the rising demand.¹²⁷ Furthermore, there is a need for more localized data on the mental health struggles faced by LGBTQ+ youth, as this population is known to experience higher rates of mental health challenges.¹²⁸

CHILD HEALTH FAST FACTS FOR PHILADELPHIA

In 2023, 288,820 children in Philadelphia were on Medicaid and 6,058 were on CHIP.

In 2024, 25,496 children were affected by Medicaid unwinding, primarily due to procedural disenrollments.

18,408 children in Philadelphia are uninsured.¹²⁹

56% of Philadelphia children are still not screened for lead.

In 2021, 24% of Philadelphia high schoolers considered suicide; 16% reported attempting suicide.

Nearly half (48%) of Philadelphia high schoolers report feeling sad or depressed most days.

The teen pregnancy rate in Philadelphia fell from 14 to 9 pregnancies per 1,000 females aged 15-19.¹³⁰

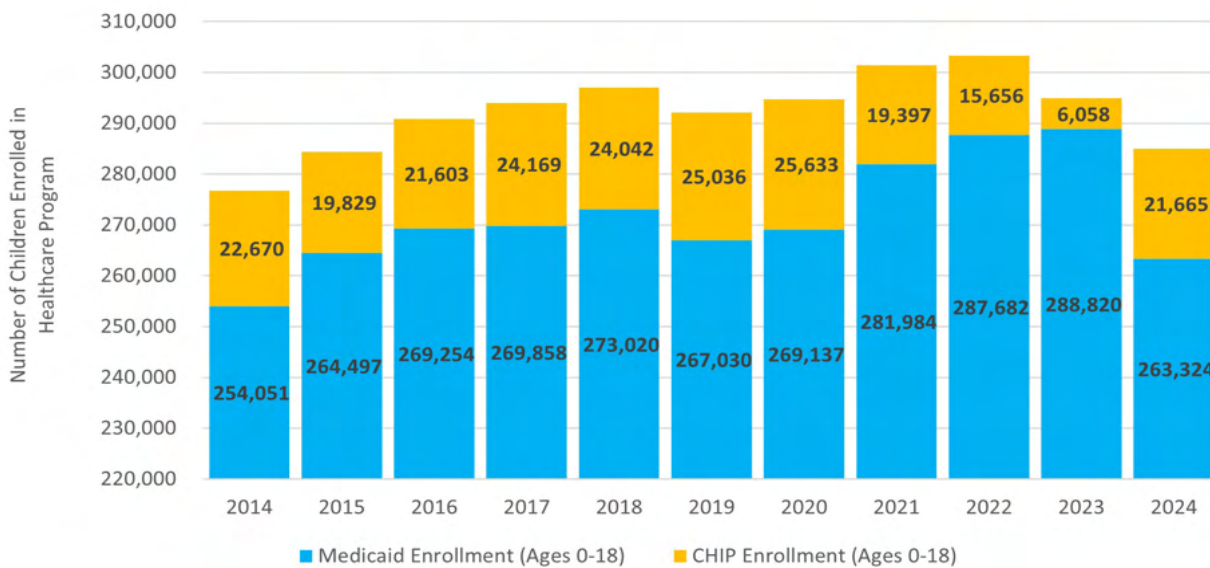
There is one licensed mental health provider for every 290 Philadelphia residents.¹³¹

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 Philadelphia County is closely tied to Medicaid, a critical support for families with limited income who cannot afford private insurance.

From 2014 to 2023, Medicaid enrollment for children in Philadelphia County steadily increased, peaking at 288,820 in 2023.¹³² 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 263,324 — a loss of 25,496 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.”)

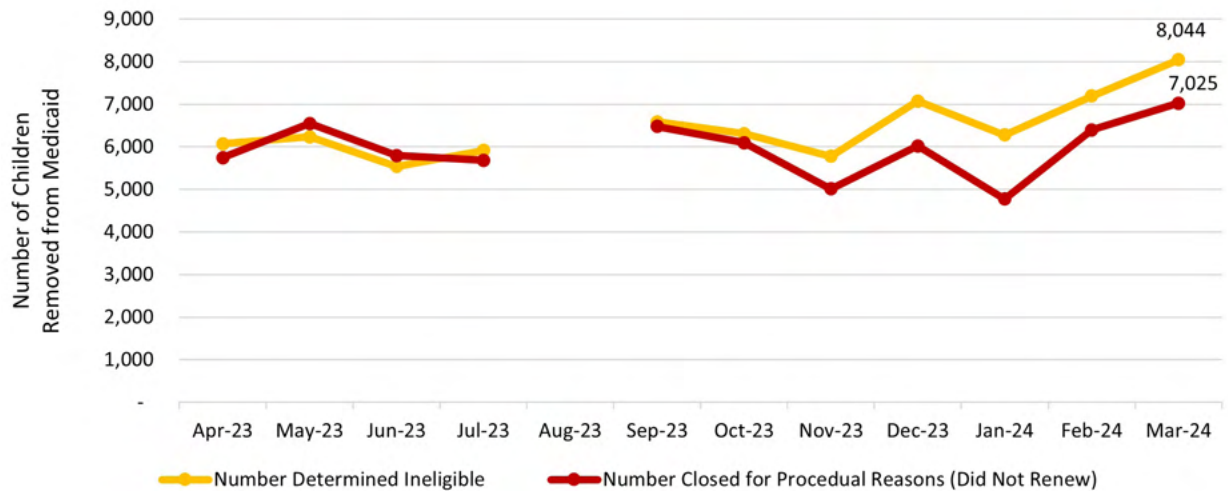
New Downward Trend in Medicaid Enrollment Likely Means Fewer Children Have Health Insurance¹³³



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 Philadelphia County have faced significant challenges in maintaining this coverage. Between April 2023 and March 2024, more than 1,000 Philadelphia County children lost their Medicaid coverage every month not because of ineligibility, but because of procedural barriers stemming from the unwinding.¹³⁴

The Number of Children Disenrolled from Medicaid is Rising ¹³⁵



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. In 2024, Philadelphia County counted 4,256 children enrolled on Medicaid based on a diagnosed disability, including physical, intellectual, developmental, or psychiatric disability. This is an increase of 850 children since 2022 despite the high percentage of disenrollment.^{136,137} 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.

Environmental Factors Increase Childhood Illness

Beyond healthcare access, environmental health justice remains a critical issue in Philadelphia, 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.

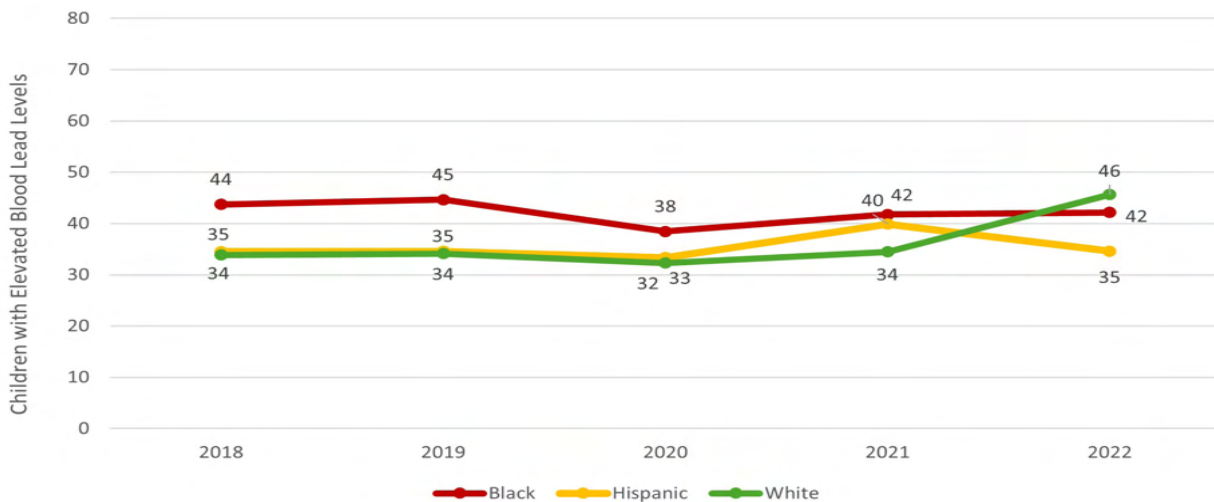
Lead Toxins Continue to Cause Permanent Harm

Lead education and prevention measures by city agencies are critical. Lead exposure is a significant health risk for children in Philadelphia, particularly in areas where 87% of the housing stock was built before lead-based paint was banned in 1978.¹³⁸ Lead poisoning is linked to irreversible cognitive and behavioral damage, contributing to poorer academic performance and long-term economic disadvantages for affected children.¹³⁹

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 44% of children under age two were tested for lead.¹⁴⁰ Previously, Black and Hispanic children had higher testing rates up until 2022, where white children had the highest lead testing rates (46%), followed by Black children (42%) and Hispanic children (35%). Historically, these higher testing rates are linked to greater utilization of Medicaid among these populations, as Medicaid requires lead testing two times before the age of two.

Less than 45% of Children are Tested for Lead Exposure ¹⁴¹



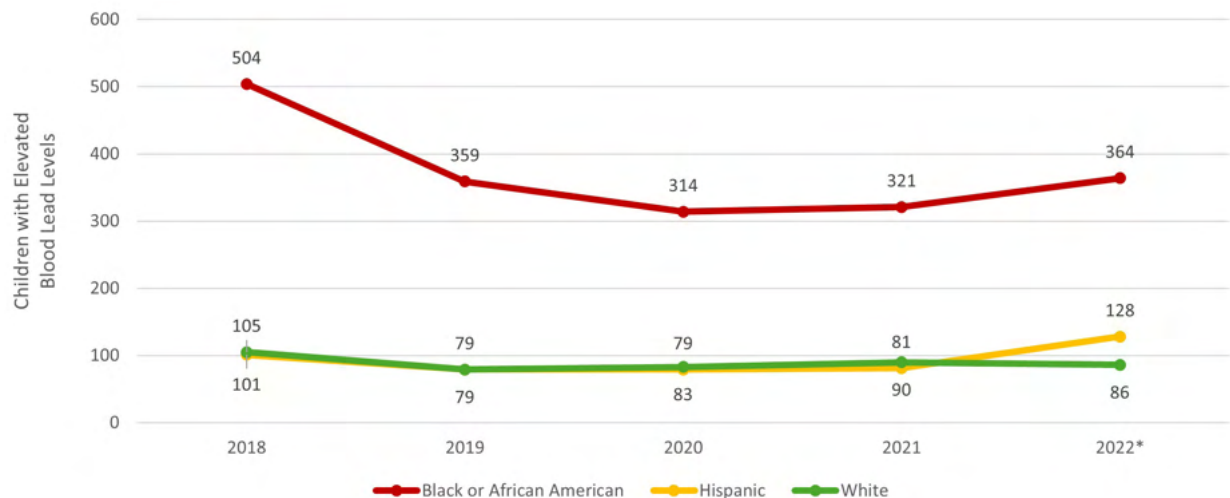
Despite improved testing rates compared to previous years, about 56% of Philadelphia County children were still not screened for lead, leaving a significant portion of the population vulnerable to undetected exposure.¹⁴²



Black children continue to experience disproportionately high rates of EBL, driven by greater exposure to outdated housing with lead-based paint.¹⁴³ This disparity reflects broader systemic inequities tied to housing and income, which limit access to safer living environments and remediation resources. Low-income families may lack the resources to move to safer housing, afford private abatement services, or negotiate abatement services from their landlord. The connection between lead exposure and low-income housing highlights the compounded risks faced by families already experiencing economic challenges.

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.¹⁴⁴ This adjustment enhances early detection of lead exposure's harmful effects but may create the perception of rising EBL rates when, in fact, the change reflects a more sensitive standard. Lead education and prevention measures by county agencies are therefore critical.

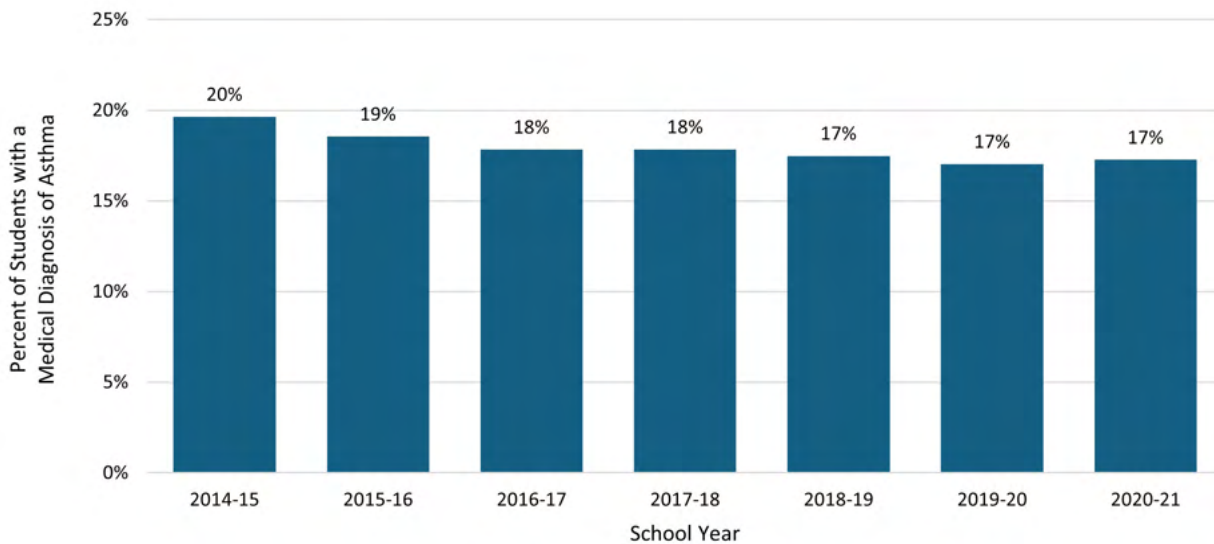
Black Children in Philadelphia Face Disproportionately Higher Risk of Lead Exposure¹⁴⁵



Progress on Childhood Asthma

Childhood asthma remains a key environmental health concern in Philadelphia. While the city has seen progress in reducing asthma rates—from nearly 20% in 2015 to 17% in 2021—Black and low-income families continue to bear a disproportionate burden.¹⁴⁶ 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 Percentage Points ¹⁴⁷



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 Philadelphia 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 11%. However, when disaggregated by race, stark disparities emerge.

Black mothers experience the highest rates of preterm births at 14%, followed by Hispanic mothers at 10%, white mothers at 8%, and 7% for Asian mothers.^{148,149} These disparities highlight the disproportionate burden on Black mothers, who consistently face the highest rates in Philadelphia County and across Pennsylvania. Environmental stressors, including air pollution and limited access to quality prenatal care, play a significant role in these inequities.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■
 Black mothers experience
 the highest rates of
 preterm births at 14%.
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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.¹⁵⁰ While these efforts are a step forward, more work needs to be done.

Vaccination Compliance Rates Worsened

Childhood vaccination rates in Philadelphia 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.¹⁵¹ Coverage failed to return to pre-pandemic levels in 2022-23, compounded by vaccine misinformation, hesitancy, and more exemptions.¹⁵²

From 2015 to 2024, the non-medical exemption rate of Philadelphia kindergartners quadrupled, from 0.6% to 2.4%.^{153,154} This increase is incredibly disturbing because even a small number of children not fully protected drastically increases the spread of preventable diseases within communities, even for vaccinated people and especially for immunocompromised people.¹⁵⁵

The share of children in Philadelphia starting school without required vaccinations **increased four fold** since 2016.



These shifts have real-world consequences. Philadelphia County reported a pertussis rate of 1.2 per 100,000 residents in 2022, but recent data indicates a significant rise in cases. A May 2024 advisory from the Philadelphia Department of Public Health highlighted increased pertussis transmission, noting that cases have returned to levels consistent with pre-pandemic peak activity.¹⁵⁶ Pennsylvania has experienced a staggering tenfold increase to over 2,000 cases—the highest in the nation—further underscoring the urgency of the situation.^{157, 158} While historically high vaccination rates have helped prevent large-scale outbreaks of diseases like measles and meningitis, the resurgence of pertussis in Philadelphia highlights the critical need to strengthen immunization efforts across all age groups to protect the most susceptible individuals.

Young People Still Struggle with their Mental Health

One in five children experience a mental, emotional, or behavioral health disorder.¹⁵⁹ Alarmingly, in Philadelphia this translates to at least 67,742 children, and fewer than half of them will receive the treatment they need due to barriers of care. This crisis is exacerbated by the shortage of mental health providers, a systemic issue which can also be observed nationwide. Families in Philadelphia 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 290 Philadelphia County residents.¹⁶⁰

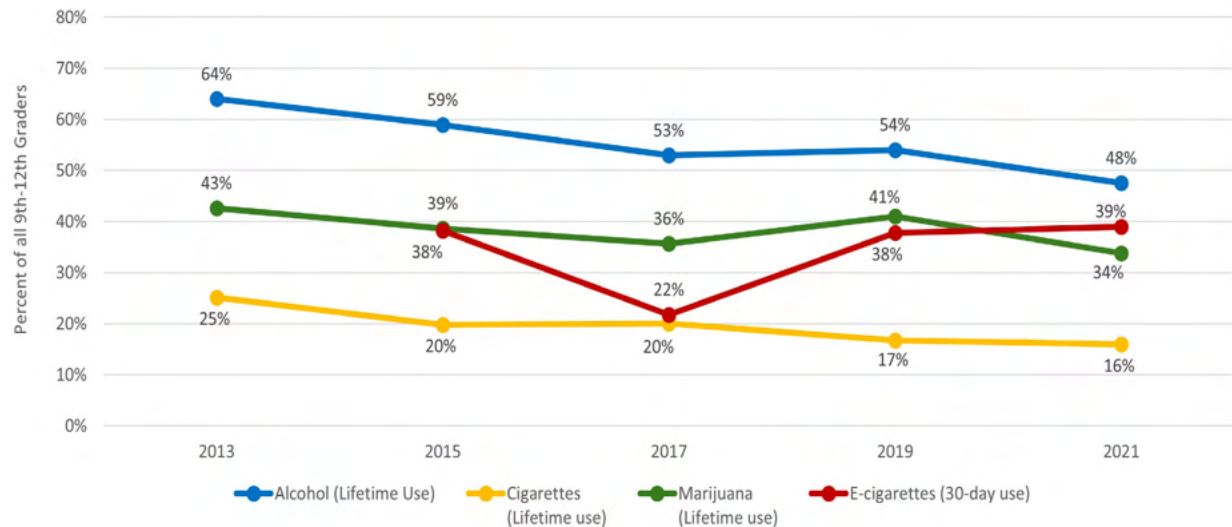
Teen Drinking, Drugs, and Smoking All Decline

Risk behaviors are important measures when considering youth mental health because research consistently shows 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 three of four risk behaviors, substance use has decreased in the last decade. The percentage of Philadelphia high schoolers who report lifetime use of alcohol has decreased from 64% of students in 2013 to 48% in 2021.¹⁶¹ Similarly, cigarette use declined from 25% to 16% and marijuana use decreased from 43% to 34%. However, while reported e-cigarettes or vape use in the past thirty days dipped in 2017, it otherwise persisted at 39% from 2015 to 2021.¹⁶²

According to Philadelphia health officials, the decrease in these risk behaviors does not appear to be attributable to any specific public health campaign or intervention.

Most Risky Youth Behaviors Show Precipitous Drop in Philadelphia Except Vaping¹⁶³



Teen Depression, Anxiety, and Suicide - Red Flag Trends

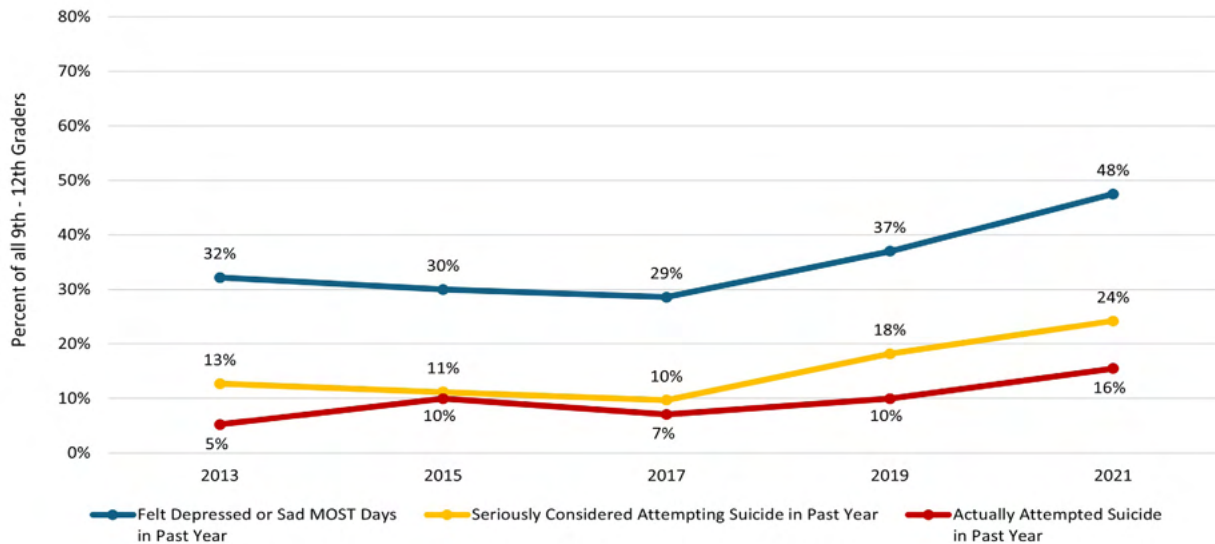
The School District of Philadelphia's Youth Risk Behavior Study (YRBS) has shown the consistently high prevalence of mental health symptoms over the past decade.¹⁶³ Philadelphia's data somewhat mirrors statewide and national trends with fewer children engaging in risk behaviors, this decline has not 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.

Among ninth to twelfth graders in the School District of Philadelphia, the percentage of youth who reported feeling sad or depressed most days in the past year increased from 32% in 2013 to 48% in 2021.¹⁶⁴

While the percentage of students who considered suicide in the past year dropped slightly from 13% in 2013 to 10% in 2017, the percentage of students considering suicide in the past year jumped to 18% in 2019 and 24% in 2021. The percentage of students who actually attempted suicide in the past year rose from 5% in 2013 to a terrifying 16% in 2021.¹⁶⁵

Stubbornly High Indicators of Mental Distress Spiked ¹⁶⁶



It is critical to emphasize here that the youth mental health crisis predates the COVID pandemic. The share of high schoolers reporting massive depression or consideration and attempts of suicide rose pre-COVID in 2019 and then rose again in 2021 with relation to pandemic school closures. Unfortunately, Philadelphia, students who considered and attempted suicide in the past year continued to rise post-COVID.

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.”¹⁶⁷ 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.¹⁶⁸

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.

Philadelphia 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. In the past year, the national 988 Lifeline, a 24/7 crisis resource, has answered 21,033 calls from Philadelphia County residents.¹⁶⁹

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 Fall

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 illustrates that family adversity, including poverty, is linked to a higher occurrence of abuse and neglect.¹⁷⁰ Abuse, neglect, and placement in foster care are all associated with a greater likelihood of mental health challenges, substance use, and poor educational outcomes.^{171,172,173}

From 2013 to 2022, the number of substantiated child abuse and neglect reports in Philadelphia fluctuated, reaching a high of just over 1,000 in 2017 and then moderating back down to 677 substantiated cases, a number only slightly higher than the number of cases of abuse or neglect in 2013.¹⁷⁴

In Philadelphia, families who need services are identified by either using the city’s child abuse and neglect hotline to ask for assistance or because someone called the hotline to report that a child appears to be a victim of abuse or neglect.

CHILD WELFARE FAST FACTS FOR PHILADELPHIA

677 substantiated reports of child abuse and neglect

11,273 children receiving in-home services

1,508 children entering foster care

209 children in congregate care (institution and group home)

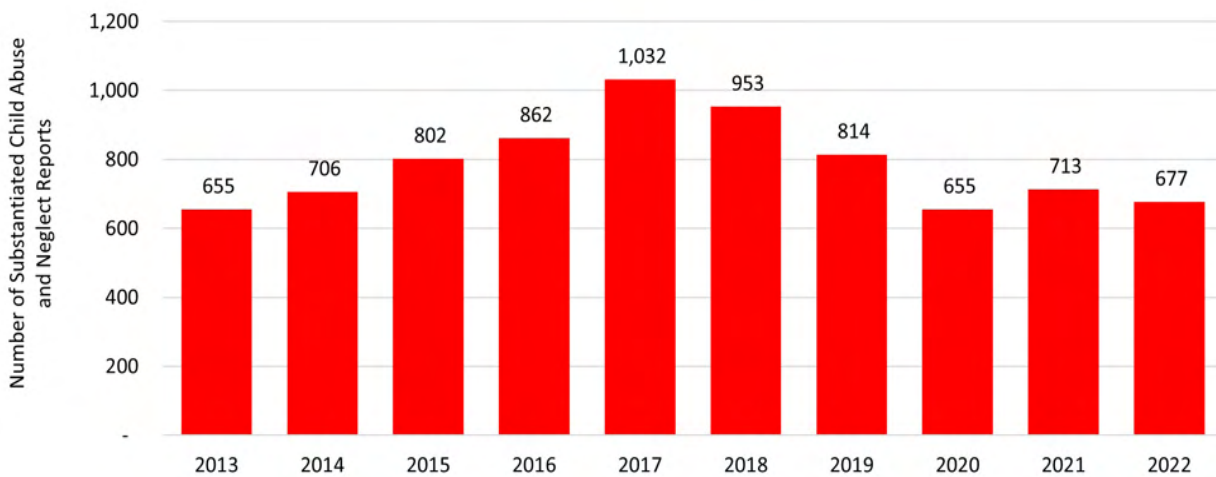
JUVENILE JUSTICE FAST FACTS FOR PHILADELPHIA

3,254 youth arrests

1,733 secure detention admissions

297 long-term facility placements

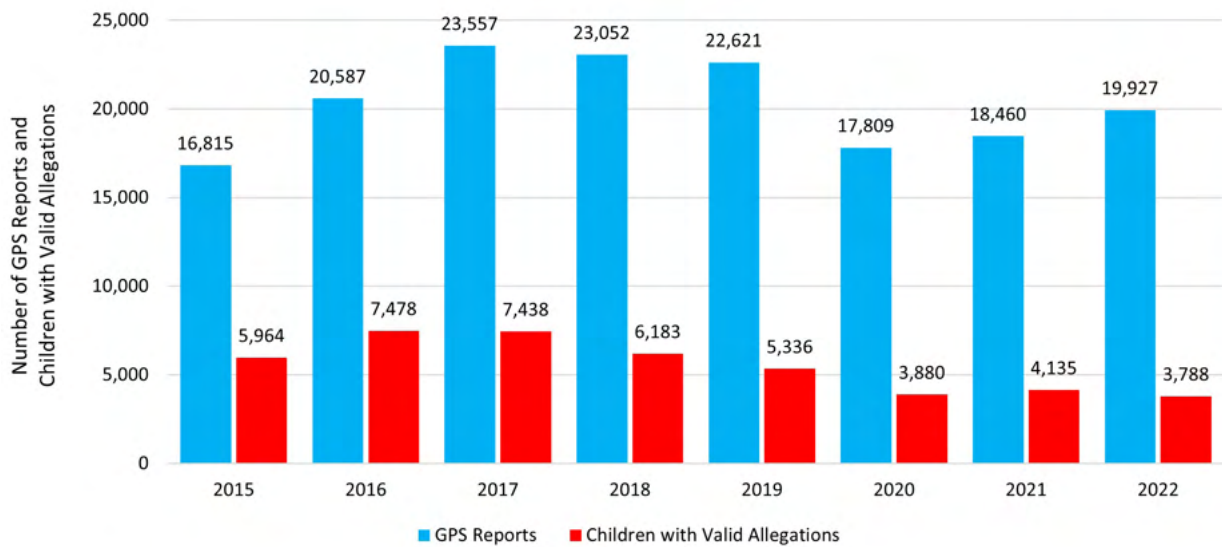
Substantiated Cases of Abuse or Neglect Return to 2013 Level¹⁷⁵



If a hotline report does not indicate that the child has experienced abuse or neglect, but it is clear that the family needs services, the report is designated as General Protective Services (GPS).

The number of GPS reports also fluctuated from 2013-2022, reaching a high of 7,478 in 2016.¹⁷⁶ By 2022, the number of new GPS cases dropped by almost half to 3,788 cases. This reduction occurred, in large measure, because the city added a more in-depth review process to screen out families whose needs could better be met by connecting them with community or prevention services.¹⁷⁷

Annually, Thousands of Children and their Families Need Services to Reduce the Risk of Abuse and Neglect ¹⁷⁸



Families Increasingly Diverted to Informal Supports

In order to help preserve the family unit and decrease the role of government in families, the city diverts most families reported to its hotline from formal child welfare system involvement. The Department of Human Services (DHS) reported that in FY24, fewer than two in five hotline calls were considered serious enough to investigate.¹⁷⁹ In cases where families are diverted to services, the city funds community providers to offer four different types of diversion services based on families' needs:

- Family Case Coordination, which includes intensive home visiting and case management for substance exposed infants and their families
- Family Empowerment Services, where families receive intensive case management and family stabilization services to manage financial and other day-to-day family function challenges

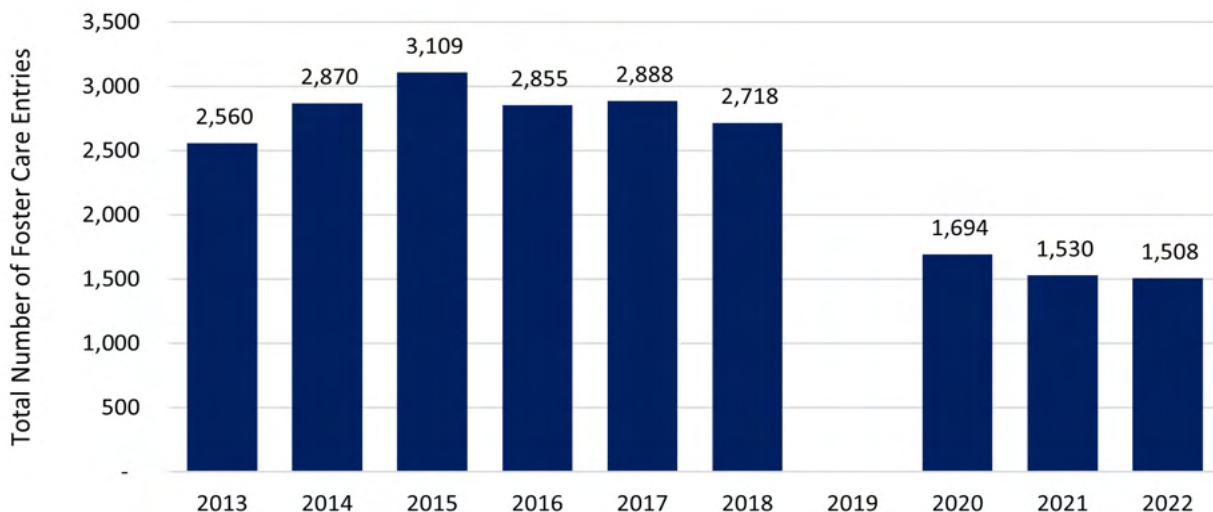
- Family Empowerment Centers, which are community hubs where families can access intensive supports to prevent future child welfare involvement
- Rapid Service Response, which includes in-home supports to increase parents’ ability to provide a safe and nurturing environment and prevent formal child welfare involvement and/or foster care placement¹⁸⁰

Fewer Children are Removed from their Families, More Receive Services Outside of the System

In the aftermath of the death of 14-year-old Danieal Kelly, Philadelphia embraced an overhaul of the DHS case management system, where DHS retained responsibility for the hotline and investigations but shifted child welfare case management to private entities known as Community Umbrella Agencies (CUAs). Under this new model, named Improving Outcomes for Children (IOC), case management services for nearly every child receiving services were gradually transferred to 10 CUAs between 2012 and 2016. DHS and its CUA partners have made efforts to prevent children from entering foster care by addressing family needs like mental health and housing, either through diversion from the formal child welfare system or by providing in-home child welfare services while families remain intact.

In 2022, 11,273 Philadelphia children and their families received in-home child welfare services to address needs related to safety, risk of harm, and overall child and family well-being, an almost 59% decrease from 2013.¹⁸¹ This trend reflects DHS’s shift in focus toward identifying opportunities to connect families to services that address their needs outside of the formal child welfare system.

Philadelphia Measures to Support Families Bring Foster Care Cases to 10-Year Low ¹⁸²



The primary reasons that children are removed from their parents' care and placed in foster care include parental substance use and mental health challenges, parental inability or failure to meet children's needs, child behavior, and physical abuse. A total of 4,893 Philadelphia children were in foster care in 2022, a 19% decrease compared to 2013.¹⁸³



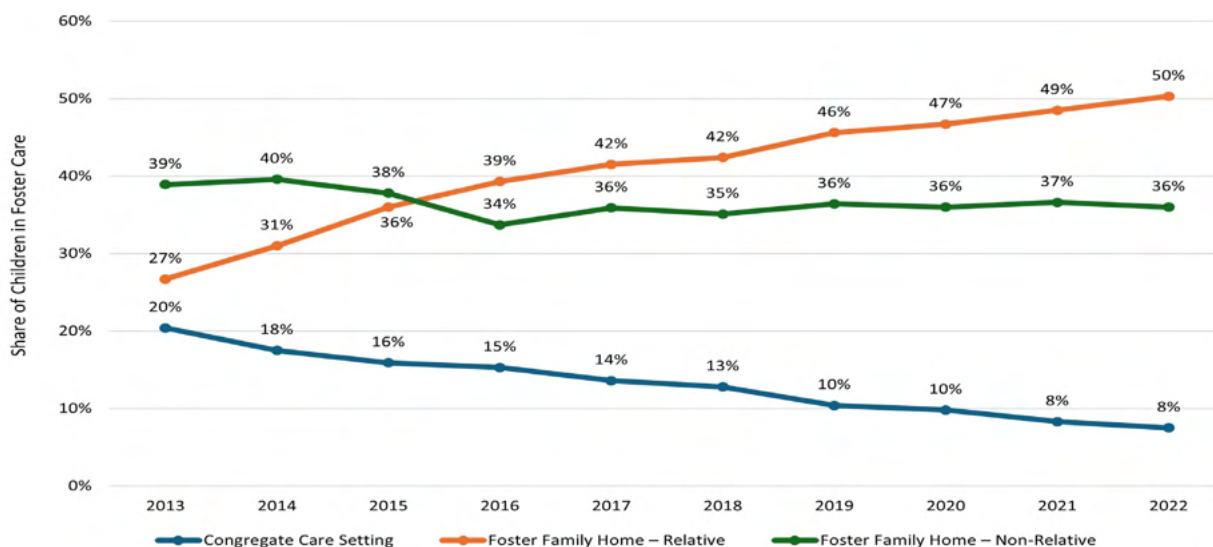
59% less children and their families are receiving in home services associated with abuse or neglect from 2013 to 2022.



The number of Philadelphia children entering into out-of-home placement each year also declined over the past decade, from 2,560 in 2013 to 1,508 in 2022. In these instances, the city's priority is to place a child with a relative before sending them to a licensed foster home. Half of children in foster care in Philadelphia are with relatives, while 36% are placed with non-relatives, with the remaining balance of children living in a congregate care facility or an independent living arrangement.

Racial disproportionality continues to pervade the system in Philadelphia, with Black children representing 64% of the total foster care population but only 42% of the total child population. This overrepresentation exists not just locally, but across the Commonwealth and nationally.

Philadelphia Reduced the Number of Children in Congregate Care by More than Half. Most Children in Foster Care are Placed with Relatives.¹⁸⁴



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.

Use of Residential Treatment is Down, but Oversight Still Needed

The city adopted a set of policies to drive down the number of children placed in institutions. As a result, the number of Philadelphia children in congregate care declined dramatically, from 20% in 2013 to 7.5% in 2022.¹⁸⁵

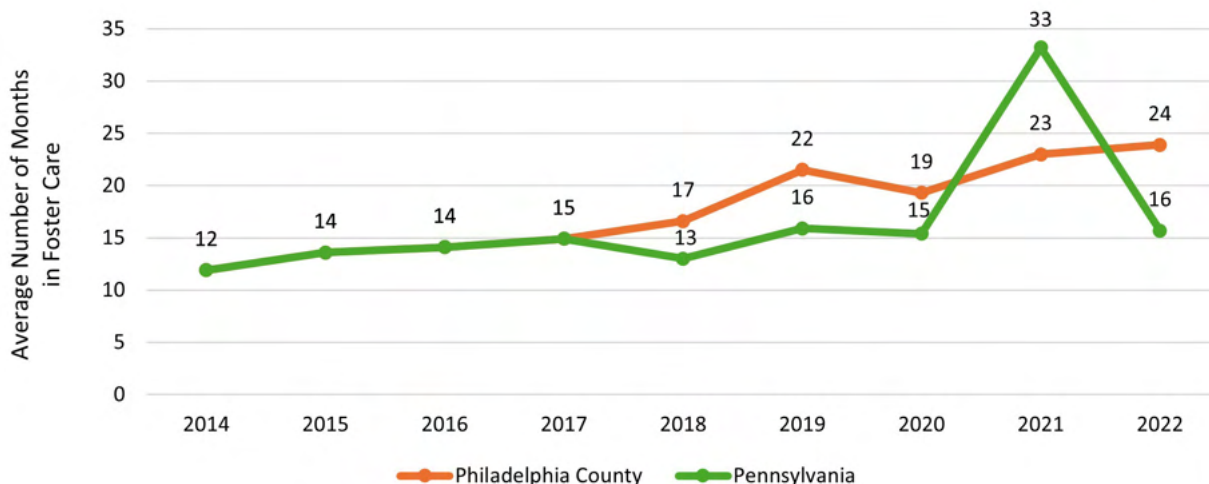
This progress was spurred along by the creation of the Youth Residential Placement Task Force, empaneled by City Council and comprised of city leadership and external system stakeholders to make recommendations that, once implemented, would reduce the use of residential placements.¹⁸⁶ The Task Force’s recommendations continue to be rolled out, and its establishment is credited with ensuring the city’s policies align with measures to reduce the institutionalization of children.

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” are more likely to have long-term negative effects related to education, housing, employment, and mental health.^{187,188}

Prior to 2018, Philadelphia children spent roughly the same amount of time in foster care as the statewide average. However, a new troubling trend shows that the length of stay in out-of-home care in Philadelphia is increasing, reaching an average of nearly two years in 2022, substantially exceeding the state average.¹⁸⁹

On Average, Philadelphia Children Spend Almost Two Years in Foster Care¹⁹⁰



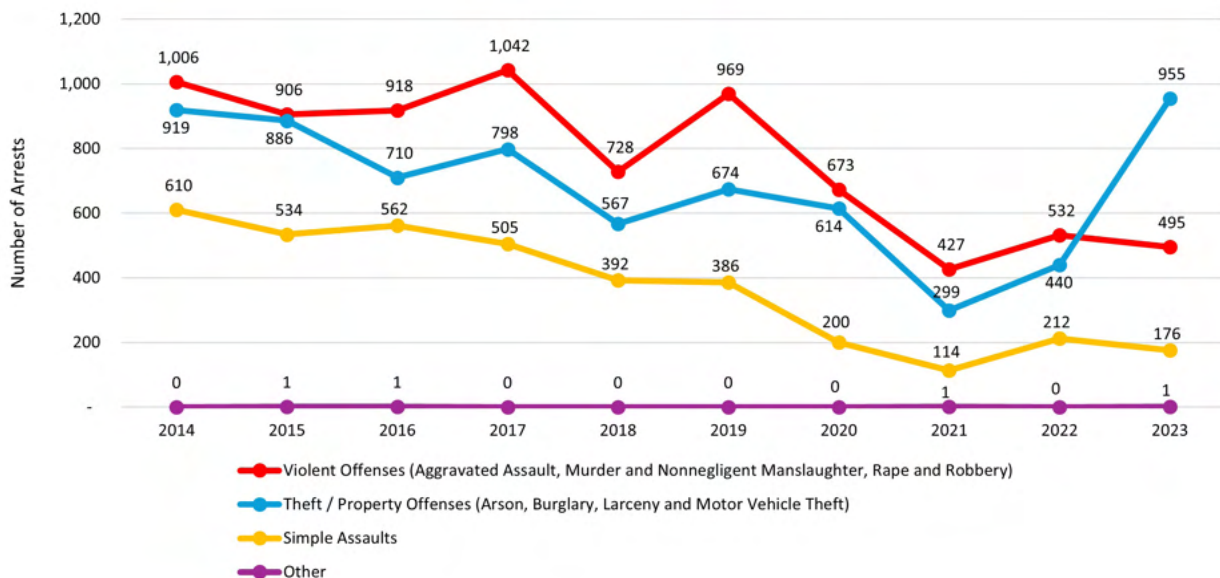
Worse yet, the number of children leaving foster care to a “forever home” (via reunification, adoption or guardianship) also decreased over the past decade, from 80% in 2014 to 71% in 2022.¹⁹¹ The number of children leaving foster care to non-permanent placements (e.g., aging out of foster care into adulthood vs. being reunified with family or adopted) increased, from 20% in 2014 to 29% in 2022.

These changes may be associated with Philadelphia’s much lower rate of entry 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 staff turnover and high caseloads within the CUAs, as well as limited 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.¹⁹² 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.¹⁹³ 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.¹⁹⁴

Youth Violent Crime Rate Dropped by 51%. Property Crimes Recently on the Rise.¹⁹⁵



These young people are also separated from their families and their communities and do not have opportunities to learn from their mistakes and make amends to the people they hurt. Children locked up are also extremely vulnerable to the adults in charge of the institutions. Shocking instances of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse by staff are all too common.

Youth crime, arrests, and incarceration, both in Philadelphia and across Pennsylvania, declined over the past decade. Arrests for violent offenses were down by over half over the 10-year period, and simple assaults (e.g., school fights), decreased 71%.¹⁹⁶ Following the COVID pandemic, youth arrests increased, with arrests for property crimes – the most common offense – more than doubling from 2022 to 2023.

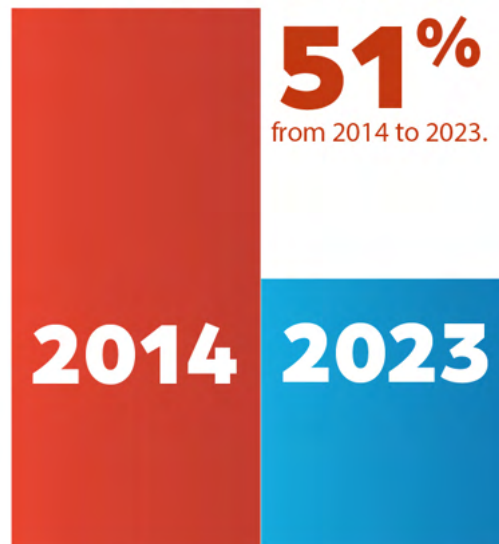
While income data is currently unavailable for youth in the juvenile justice system, the number of thefts and other property offenses further underscores the economic hardships faced by young people and their families, as well as a lack of available community-based activities.

While data is not available on the number of youth held in detention, the Juvenile Court Judges' Commission does release the annual number of admissions to secure detention for each county. One youth could count for more than one admission; for example, a young person could be transferred from one detention center to another, and that is counted as two admissions.

In 2023, there were 1,733 admissions of Philadelphia youth to the Philadelphia Juvenile Justice Services Center (PJJSC) or another detention center, accounting for nearly half of all admissions to detention in the Commonwealth.¹⁹⁷

The PJJSC has, on numerous occasions in recent years, been overcrowded, with population numbers well beyond its designated capacity. The city reported that this was largely due to long waits for placement at the state-operated Youth Development Centers (YDCs), which provide long-term treatment to young people who have been found to be delinquent.¹⁹⁸ The state recently expanded capacity at YDCs, opening a new facility in Montgomery County in 2024 and adding staff to increase capacity at others.

Violent crime caused by children in Philadelphia dropped by

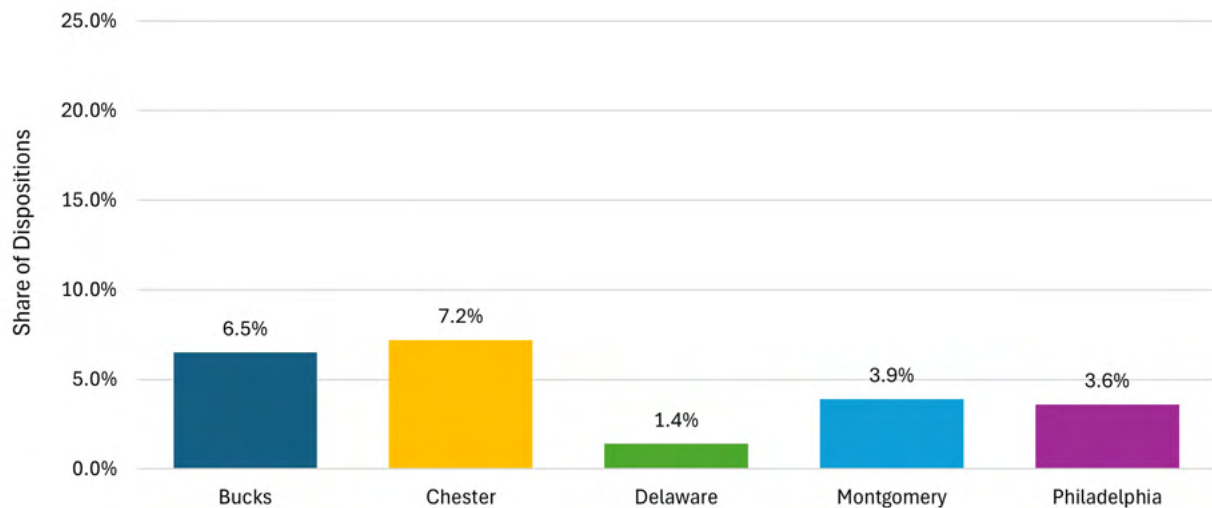


The Pennsylvania Department of Human Services (PA DHS) noted that youth are being sent to the YDCs for long periods of time, beyond the usual time frames for treatment.¹⁹⁹ As such, state facilities are experiencing challenges ensuring that staffing is appropriate for the increase in population.

Despite troublingly high numbers of youth held in detention while awaiting juvenile court processes, 3.6% of initial delinquency court decisions sent Philadelphia youth to long-term secure facilities.²⁰⁰ In 2023, Philadelphia delinquency courts ordered 297 institutional placements (placement is a long-term out-of-home program). Most other juvenile court decisions resulted in less restrictive interventions, like probation and/or community services.

Racial disproportionality is egregious in the juvenile justice system in Philadelphia and across Pennsylvania. In Philadelphia, Black youth are overrepresented in delinquency determinations (78%) and detention admissions (79%), despite comprising 42% of the city's youth population.²⁰¹

Philadelphia has the Second Lowest Share of Long-Term Juvenile Justice Placements in the Region²⁰²



The District Attorney's Office oversees a number of diversion opportunities for youth, including a Youth Aid Panel and restorative justice programs in partnership with community-based providers. In 2023, 75% of new delinquency charges were diverted, which means those youth were given the option to avoid a conviction going on their juvenile record.²⁰³

For students who might have otherwise been involved in the legal system due to behavior in school, the Philadelphia School-Based Diversion program reduced school-based arrests by over 90% over eight years by referring certain low-level behaviors to community-based programming instead of the juvenile justice system.²⁰⁴ The police department-school district partnership allows students to receive Intensive Prevention Services administered by the city's DHS; most of them complete the program successfully and do not get rearrested.

Most recently, the city launched two new opportunities for youth diversion: police-led community diversion and the Juvenile Assessment Center (JAC). In early 2025, Philadelphia Police Commissioner Kevin Bethel, who was previously Chief of School Safety at the School District of Philadelphia and oversaw the expansion of school-based diversion, launched a citywide pre-arrest/pre-charge diversion effort. This allows patrol officers to, depending on seriousness of offense, refer young people to community-based services instead of sending them through the formal legal system.²⁰⁵

The JAC provides a central, youth-friendly space for youth to be processed after arrest in a timely manner. There, social service staff and Philadelphia police work collaboratively to provide assessments and support youth while determinations are made regarding charges and possible detention. In its first year, the JAC helped facilitate pre-arrest diversion for over 300 youth and provided over 700 referrals to community services (including behavioral health, food, and housing supports).



Local and County Recommendations: Philadelphia

In Early Childhood Education, Philadelphia must:

- Utilize city-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.

To Improve K-12 Public Education Outcomes, the School District of Philadelphia must:

- Invest in teacher training programs and classroom supplies to generate optimal impact for the funds already spent on new high-quality English Language Arts and Math curricula.
- Invest in evidence-based instructional programming 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 teach family members how to support their children with coursework.
- Improve working conditions to retain educators and other school staff. This will look different in each school and may include adjusting salaries, reducing class sizes and workloads, and creating opportunities for formalized leadership roles and career advancement. View the Philadelphia Citywide Talent Coalition's recommendations for teacher retention for more details.²⁰⁶

Local and County Recommendations: Philadelphia

For Improved Child Health Outcomes, Philadelphia 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, Philadelphia 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.⁵
- 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.
- Reconvene the Youth Residential Placement Task Force to review progress toward implementing recommendations and assess whether additional policy change is needed to further reduce the use of congregate care facilities.

To Improve the Juvenile Justice System, Philadelphia must:

- Continue, and expand where possible, efforts to divert young people from the formal legal system.
- Ensure a robust service array for those young people who do enter the juvenile justice system, including evidence-based alternatives to incarceration and mid-level residential programs.

For Improved Economic Mobility, Philadelphia must:

- Invest in high school and community college career relate learning programs that increase share of individuals with post-secondary 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:

- 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.²⁰⁷
- 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.
- 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 vacancies.
- 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 18,408 uninsured children in Philadelphia.
- 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 city entities.
- 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/phillyendnotes2025

