

# THE OKLAHOMAN

## NEWS

# Report ranks Oklahoma as one of the worst states for child well-being. Here's why



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Oklahoma remains one of the worst states for child well-being, according to a new report.

Oklahoma ranks 46th among 50 states in the annual Kids Count report, released Monday, June 9, by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Every measure of educational success tracked by the report has worsened in recent years. At the same time, economic insecurity has increased, with 21% of Oklahoma children living in poverty.

That statistic is not a surprise to Austin Prickett, the marketing manager at the [Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma](#). He said the organization has seen a steady influx in the need for food assistance.

It was the third consecutive year that Oklahoma ranked as the fifth-worst state for childhood well-being in the report. Only New Mexico, Louisiana, Mississippi and Nevada fared worse.

Gov. Kevin Stitt, who has long touted his push to make Oklahoma a “Top 10 state,” dismissed the findings in a statement, saying that “every year the same groups put out the same report with the same conclusion: spend more taxpayer money, expand government and everything will be okay.”

“Families are moving to Oklahoma because it’s a place where values still matter, cost of living is low and government gets out of the way,” Stitt said. “The best days for Oklahoma families are still ahead.”

But Carly Putnam, policy director for the Oklahoma Policy Institute and a state coordinator for the Kids Count report, pointed to Oklahoma's disinvestment as a reason for the Sooner State's lack of improvement compared to its peers.

She said the report shows a disconnect between what Oklahoma says it values and what it is the reality for thousands of Oklahoma children.

“We claim to be a family-friendly state that cares deeply about the well-being of children and ensuring that this is a great place to grow up and that households are supported, and with 21% of our kids in poverty, I’m not seeing that here,” Putnam said.

**More:** [These volunteers are a vital pillar for Oklahoma's food bank](#)

## **What the Kids Count report says about Oklahoma children's well-being**

The Kids Count report tracks changes over time in education, economic, health and other outcomes. The new report mostly compares 2019 figures to 2023 figures to show improvements or declines. The states that fared best were New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Utah and Minnesota.

The report ranked Oklahoma 48th in education, pointing to the state's higher than average share of 3- and 4-year-olds not in school, fourth-graders not proficient in reading, eighth-graders not proficient in math and high school students not graduating on time.

The steepest drop was in math proficiency, going from 74% of eighth-graders not being proficient in 2019 to 83% in 2023. The national rate that year was 73%.

Oklahoma's education system has been in the spotlight under [state schools Superintendent Ryan Walters](#), who has gained attention for his mandate that schools teach from the Bible. In a statement, Walters said Oklahoma's school system had made progress under his guidance.

**More:** [Oklahoma lawmakers, others work to curb Ryan Walters' political influence](#)

"The State Department of Education has made extraordinary progress with teacher recruitment, high dosage tutoring, character development, competitive pay for teachers, and parental empowerment within our schools," Walters said in a statement.

Oklahoma also fared poorly when it comes to health. The report ranked it 43rd among all states. While more children had insurance and less children were overweight or obese, there were more low-birthweight babies and more child and teen deaths per 100,000.

Oklahoma had 40 deaths per 100,000 children, compared to the U.S. average of 29 in 2023.

Measures of economic well-being also flatlined or worsened. The childhood poverty rate went from 20% in 2019 to 21% in 2023, and the share of children living in homes facing a high housing cost burden increased from 25% to 27%. Children whose parents lack secure employment and teens not in school and not working stayed the same.

Advocates point to Oklahoma's consistently high rates of childhood poverty as a reason the state should have participated in a federal program that helps families feed children in the summer while students are out of school. Stitt opted the state out of the Summer EBT program. But some tribal nations and food banks have worked to extend the aid to a growing number of families.

"We know that coming together, it takes a partnership between nonprofit organizations like ourselves, community members and also the government, if we're

ever really going to make a dent in sad statistics like the one that came out in this report,” Prickett said.

The Kids Count report did show some slight improvements for Oklahoma, including in the rate of teen births and share of children living in high-poverty areas.

Tracking measures of childhood well-being is important because these children are the next generation of Oklahomans, Prickett said.

“If we are viewing things like this as indicators on a dashboard of child well-being, what would we look like if we chose to say, ‘Actually, this is unacceptable; this doesn’t reflect Oklahoma values, and we’re going to commit to being brave and doing better?’” Putnam said.