

A LOOK AT THE STATUS

OF CHESTER COUNTY KIDS



AND THEIR OPPORTUNITIES

FOR A BETTER FUTURE.

A CHILDREN FIRST BRIEF ON CHESTER COUNTY

November 2025

A DECADE OF STALLED PROGRESS: OPPORTUNITY STUNTED FOR CHILDREN IN CHESTER COUNTY

How are children and teens doing? Every two years, Children First answers that question in our comprehensive analysis of the status of children and teens in southeastern PA counties. We're glad to share with you some of the key findings – go to childrenfirstpa.org to read the full report, *A Decade of Stalled Progress: Opportunities Stunted for Children in Chester County*. Knowledge is power and Children First hopes you'll use this information about Chester County youth to fuel your advocacy efforts for children and teens.

Chester County: Quick Pic

Chester County is home to approximately 119,000 children, many with families who are able to afford the basics that will launch them into happiness, success, and stability – the American Dream. But at least 22,000 children live in families that cannot afford their needs, and more than 7,600 live in poverty. Current resources are inadequate to meet the health care, early learning, education, and family supports needed for these children to reach their full potential.

ECONOMIC HARDSHIP PREVAILS

Three out of ten Chester County parents cannot afford to provide for their kids beyond the bare minimum. A family needs to make **\$91,548** to cover rent, food, transportation, health insurance, and other essentials; that jumps to **\$115,728** if child care is added to the equation. **Eight percent** of families have trouble putting food on the table – SNAP enrollment is up **25%** since 2019 and the number of Chester County families receiving WIC is at a **five-year high**. The number of homeless children is the second highest in the region – estimated at **1,702**, but the real number is likely higher because many caregivers find temporary alternatives to shelters.

13,677

KIDS RECEIVE
SNAP

up 25% since 2019

3,179

KIDS ON
WIC

a five-year high

1,702

KIDS WITHOUT
HOMES

CHILD CARE CHALLENGES PERSIST

For the parents of nearly **29,000 Chester County children under five**, there are few early childhood policies that support them and their children's critical early learning years.

LACK OF PAID FAMILY LEAVE

Nearly 3,700 newborn babies went home with parents who did not have paid time off to care for them. Sixty-six percent of PA businesses don't offer paid family and medical leave. New parents are forced into an awful dilemma: stay home and go into debt, or go back to work and sacrifice precious bonding time.

66%

OF BUSINESSES ACROSS PA

DON'T OFFER PAID FAMILY & MEDICAL LEAVE

CHILD CARE COSTS RISE WITH INFLATION

Child care costs for Chester County families increased **34%** over the past decade. Young families who can afford to pay out-of-pocket spend **15%** of their income on child care. State programs like **Child Care Works**, which provides subsidies to low-income working families, can be a game changer but **74%** of eligible children can't get care because of staffing shortages.

STAFFING SHORTAGES CUT SUPPLY

For only **\$15.80/hour**, early learning teachers work long hours caring for very young children who require constant attention. With such high demands, many qualified workers leave the field to be paid more in the schools or even in retail or fast food. As a result, child care centers are understaffed, and providers can't enroll additional children. Last year alone, **712** young Chester County children were turned away – equivalent to two entire elementary schools – due to underfunding.

\$15.80/hour

AVERAGE PAY FOR

CHESTER COUNTY CHILD CARE STAFF

TROUBLING TRENDS IN EDUCATION

Sixty-seven percent of Chester County third graders can read on grade level; **40%** of eighth graders are proficient in math. Students in the county's highest-poverty districts – Coatesville Area and Oxford Area School Districts – have among the lowest scores.

67%

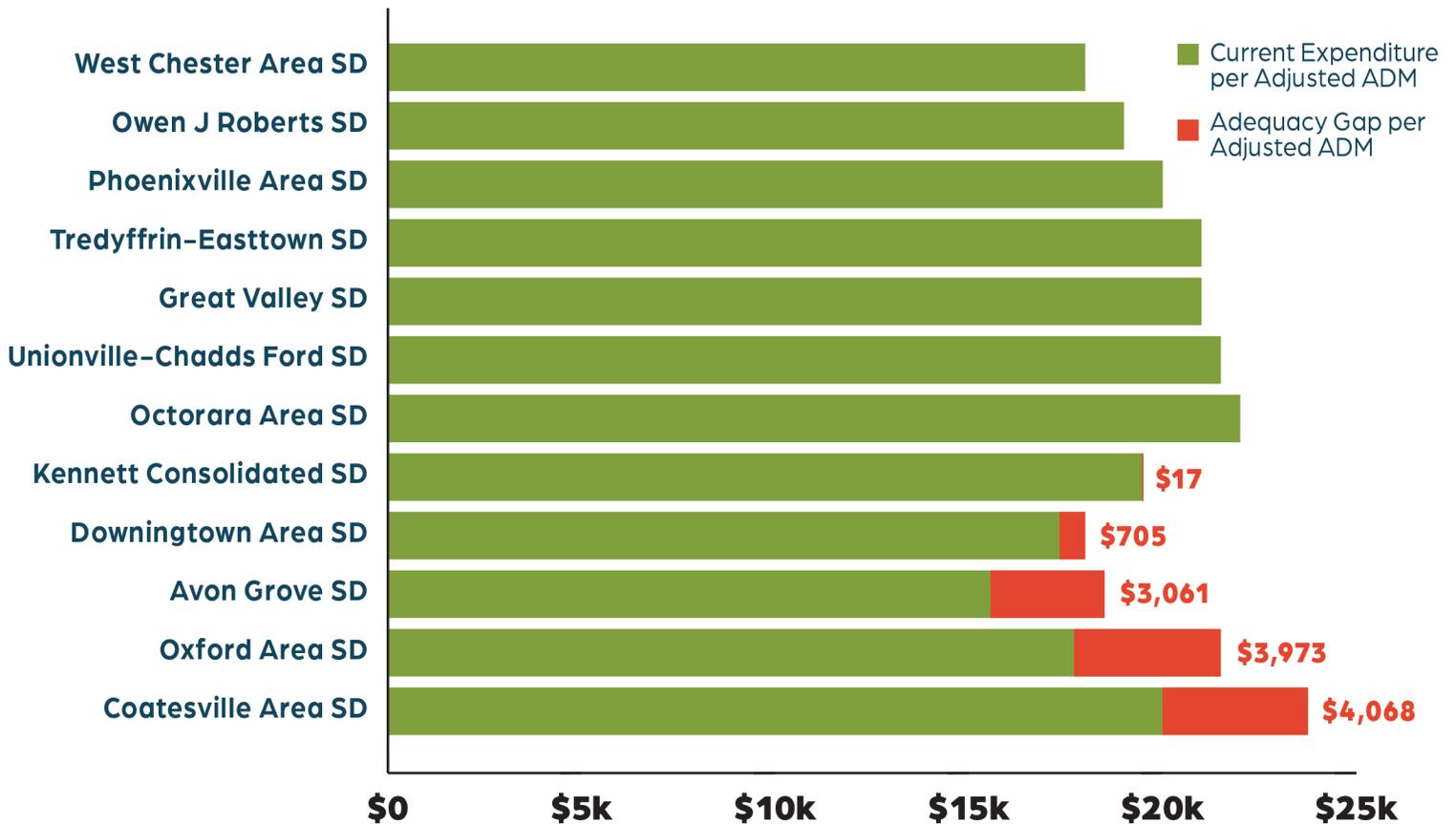
OF ALL THIRD GRADERS CAN
READ ON GRADE LEVEL

40%

OF ALL EIGHTH GRADERS
ARE PROFICIENT IN MATH

Because property taxes are the main source of education funding, districts with a low-value housing market can't generate enough tax revenue. These districts teach the highest number of Black, brown, and low-income students.

There are five districts in Chester County that are owed more than **\$79 million** by the state to be able to deliver the adequate education that higher wealth districts provide, with small class sizes, personalized instruction, specialists, counselors, extracurricular activities, updated textbooks and instructional equipment, etc.



EXPENDITURES PER ADJUSTMENT ADM

TROUBLING TRENDS IN EDUCATION

EDUCATION PATHWAYS TO GOOD JOBS STYMIED

Career and Technical Education (CTE) gives students an academic and career advantage, but only **4%** of Chester County high school students are enrolled in CTE, the lowest share of the five southeastern counties.

CHARTER SCHOOL COSTS SOAR

Cyber charter school payments soared **66%** over the past eight years, costing Chester County school districts **\$20 million**, far more than what it actually costs to provide a virtual education. Payments to brick and mortar charter school increased by **\$94 million**.

CYBER CHARTER SCHOOL PAYMENTS IN CHESTER COUNTY ROSE BY

66%
in eight years reaching
\$20 MILLION

CHILD HEALTH AT RISK

THOUSANDS OF CHILDREN TO LOSE ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE

In 2023, **29%** of the county's children (34,867) were covered by Medicaid. By 2024, that number dropped to 29,704, approximately **5,100** children lost their coverage, even though many were still eligible. Post-COVID changes to federal enrollment rules caused thousands of kids to be dropped from coverage and it's unknown how many are still uninsured.

FROM 2023 TO 2024,
5,100
CHESTER COUNTY CHILDREN LOST THEIR MEDICAID COVERAGE

CHILD HEALTH AT RISK

LEAD TOXINS CONTINUE TO CAUSE PERMANENT HARM

Toxic lead paint remains a threat in a significant number of Chester County homes but **71%** of children under the age of two are not tested for lead poisoning. Early detection is the best way to minimize the irreversible cognitive and behavioral damage that results in serious challenges in school and life.

71%

OF CHILDREN IN CHESTER COUNTY
NOT SCREENED FOR EXPOSURE TO TOXIC LEAD

RISKY BEHAVIORS DROP

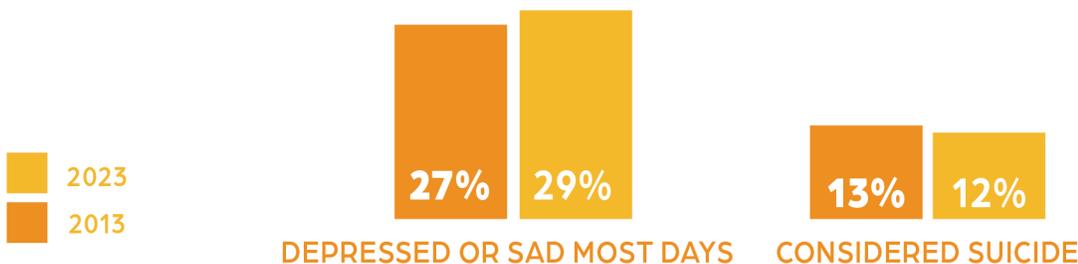
One bright spot for Chester County is that tweens and teens are making smarter choices when it comes to drugs and alcohol. Over a ten-year period, alcohol use **dropped 15** percentage points, smoking **dropped seven** percentage points, and marijuana use **dropped six** percentage points. Since 2015, vaping **dropped 7** percentage points.

SADLY, POOR MENTAL HEALTH AMONG TEENS PERSISTS

Approximately **24,000** Chester County children experience a mental, emotional, or behavioral health disorder; fewer than half of them will receive the treatment they need. To make matters worse, there is only one licensed mental health provider for every **330** Chester County residents.

Over the past decade, the percentage of children and teens who feel depressed or sad most days rose slightly from 27% to **29%**; **12%** of young people considered suicide. Social media is a major contributor to the persistent youth mental health crisis. The addictive nature of social media has fundamentally altered childhood, isolating children in an online world and robbing them of real-life interaction that fosters social connection and meaning.

MENTAL HEALTH OF CHESTER COUNTY CHILDREN OVER A DECADE



BETTER SECOND CHANCES

When young people break the law, most often the best way to boost community safety is to keep kids out of jail. Locking up children and teens makes it so much harder for them to make better choices as an adult. **Eighty percent** of young people who are imprisoned return to prison within three years. In 2023, **155** young people were locked up, the second lowest in southeastern Pennsylvania counties.

A better alternative is community-based programs that keep children in their homes and schools, teaching them how to make better choices, and requiring that they make amends. These kids get the tools and support to stay out of trouble, instead of children in jail who are isolated, abused, and traumatized.

Chester County is one of seven PA counties working to reduce racial disproportionality in juvenile justice through the Georgetown University Advancing Racial Justice in Youth Legal Systems program. The county team's project focuses on early intervention and diversion programs for kids who commit school-based offenses, giving them a better shot for a second chance.

KEEPING KIDS SAFE AT HOME

Children who are abused, neglected, or placed in foster care have lower grades in school, and higher instances of mental health problems, drug use, and alcohol abuse. If fixable problems like poverty or family instability are the cause of family stress, it's best for children to safely stay at home. Fortunately, the number of Chester County children in foster care dropped significantly.

171

KIDS IN FOSTER CARE
2013

78

KIDS IN FOSTER CARE
2022

Chester County is ramping the delivery of ongoing supports to parents so children are safe and families stay whole. In 2022, **2,310** Chester County children and their families received these in-home support services, a slight increase from 2014, which reflects the county's shift toward serving families whose needs can be met outside the formal child welfare system.



THE ADVOCATE FOR KIDS

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LEARN MORE AND GET INVOLVED

Far too many kids and teens are not getting the support they need to be happy, healthy, and successful. This short report offers you important information about the status of Chester County children.

Children First doesn't just point out the problems - we expose the harms that children face, point to tested solutions, and work with people like you to persuade lawmakers to enact change.

Learn more about kids in Chester County and recommended actions leaders can take to improve children's lives:

www.childrenfirstpa.org/2025countyreports

Join us to push for the solutions children urgently need and support our work:
www.childrenfirstpa.org/joinus