



COVID'S IMPACT ON CHILDREN IN PHILADELPHIA

The Case For An Ambitious Rebound



***A Children First Report
on Philadelphia's Children***

August 2022

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THE ADVOCATE FOR KIDS
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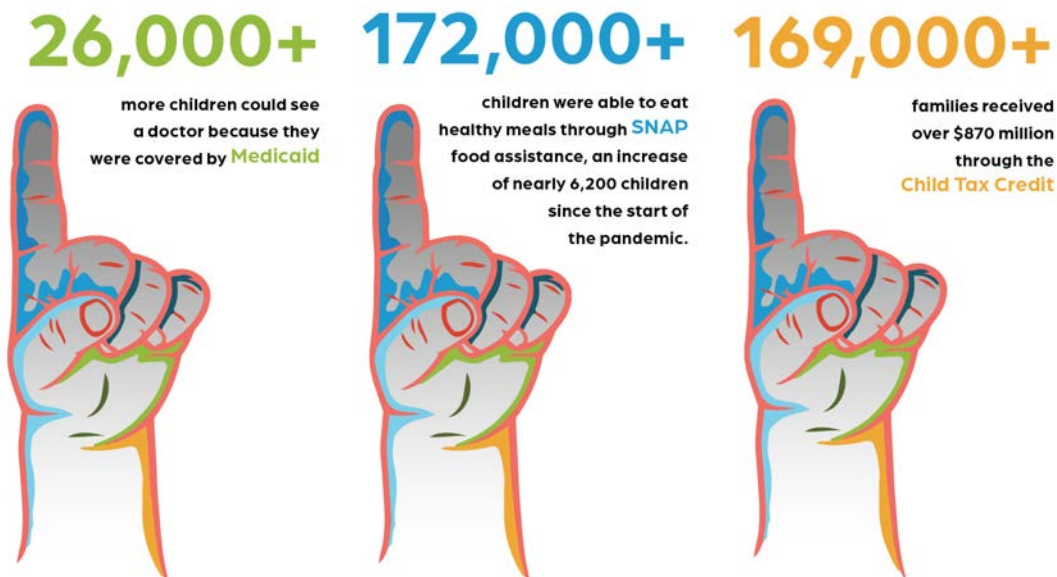
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Introduction

As we emerge from the turmoil and pain of the pandemic, parents in every corner of Philadelphia continue to deal with the alarming effect of COVID on children. The community institutions that partner with parents to support their children's healthy development are also still reeling from impact of COVID. Although not one child is known to have died from COVID in the city, over 5,100 Philadelphians perished, often leaving children without grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and worse yet, one or both parents.¹ Without question of all children, children of color suffered the harshest effects of COVID as their family members were sickened and died at much higher rates than the White residents of the city. The lives of these children were also set asunder by the alarming rise in gun violence that continues unabated since the pandemic began. In the first six months of 2022, 108 children were shot and 18 of these children lost their lives.² Suffice to say the pandemic and its aftermath have not been good for the city's children.

The lives of children and families would have been much worse had good public policy not served as a life preserver. While parents were unable to work and schools were shuttered, federal flexibility and funds coupled with the Herculean efforts on the part of city and school leaders provided extraordinary protections for children. These efforts especially buoyed children of color who otherwise would have fallen through the cracks.



Federal COVID relief policies acted like a safety net, catching children so they didn't fall into an abyss of poverty, hunger, and sickness. In fact, the Child Tax Credit improved the lives of children, lifting thousands out of poverty. However, children are still suffering from historic levels of anxiety and depression, and most are months, if not years, behind where they should be in school.

Meanwhile pediatric health, education, early learning, child protection, and social support systems that partner with parents are stretched thin or exhausted. The staff of these critical child-serving partners are themselves still recovering while having to make the extra effort to help children catch up in every way.

To make matters worse, the staffing crisis in public schools and child care centers means that far fewer families will be able to rely on these essential institutions, with communities of color being most affected.

At the household level, the expiration of the Child Tax Credit is likely to mean that over 23,000 Philadelphia children will fall back into poverty, further compounding the impact of COVID on their lives.³

Healing from this pandemic will take much more than a medical solution. It will require federal, state, and local policies and resources to cure the lasting effects of the pandemic on children.

Executive Summary

Without question the pandemic made the lives of every child in Philadelphia harder in the short-term; for far too many, the long-term consequences are likely to stunt opportunity throughout their lives. Among the myriad of impacts, five key indicators point to the need for robust new policies and resources.

1. Students Fell Further Behind in School – National research makes a compelling case that nearly every student will complete the 2021-22 school year behind due to the many months of virtual and regularly interrupted instruction. Before COVID struck, 73% of the city's public-school students were already unable to meet basic English and math targets.⁴ Worse yet, the city's public schools went virtual for months and these schools have fewer resources than every other public school in southeastern Pennsylvania to help students catch up. Targeted efforts to recoup learning losses and push students ahead are urgently needed.

2. Children Are Less Healthy – The pandemic harmed the mental health of children. Pennsylvania's statewide Safe2Say hotline fielded more suicide related calls from students across the state during COVID. The calls from youth in Philadelphia jumped by an alarming 62%.⁵ Certainly, the feelings of loneliness, hopelessness, fear, and depression reached far and wide across the city, and they are likely to continue to affect the lives of thousands of children. Add to that the frightening implications of rising gun violence taking its toll mostly on children of color, and it's clear that dramatic new and expanded supports to improve the mental wellness of children are critically needed.

3. Risk of Childhood Communicable Diseases Rose – Alarming, the percentage of younger children not fully vaccinated against COVID is 71%; among teens, it's 40%.⁶ Moreover, there's been an erosion in the share of children starting school with required inoculations. Public health measures once thought of as routine are now in need of fortification.

4. Fewer Children Were in Poverty – The one glimmer of hope during the pandemic was the impact of federal policy that lifted over 16,000 children out of poverty in the first year of the shutdown.⁷ Given the lifetime consequences of growing up in poverty, this shift out of poverty had the potential to be a gamechanger for these children. The tragedy is that with federal policy no longer in place, thousands of children are likely to fall back into poverty. That's got to change.

5. Child Care Providers and Schools are Weaker – The economic turmoil caused a hollowing-out of schools and child care centers where both sectors are facing severe labor shortages with insufficient funds to compete for qualified staff. As a result, young children, particularly children of color, are losing access to the crucial development benefits of great child care and pre-k, and public school students will face greater hurdles with larger classes and fewer professionals to support their development.

The lessons learned from the virus are many. First among them is the need to ensure the city and the state have capable public health infrastructures. There is ample research indicating that more lives could have been saved if the nation's public health infrastructure had been more prepared to respond to the sweeping COVID contagion.

The Philadelphia Department of Health made a yeoman's effort to contain the virus, yet its stumbles cannot be overlooked. From weak oversight of contracts for inoculation and underwhelming efforts to provide public health services in communities of color, the city struggled to get ahead of the curve.

The City's Office of Children and Families gave the city a bird's eye view into the needs of children. That perspective was invaluable to the city's efforts to partner with the school district and non-profit organizations to get food and personal hygiene supplies to families. In addition, the Office opened up over 70 Access Centers serving 1,200 children a day across the city where many children who were home alone or with limited supervision could safely attend virtual schooling.⁸

Without question, the city's ability to focus on the needs of children during this crisis was possible because of the existence of the Office of Children and Families. Yet even this office and its partners struggled mightily to meet the needs of children, suggesting that lessons learned and planning ahead for the next crisis is critically needed.

Five Things to Do to Protect Children

Put Children First in a Crisis – The City’s Office of Children and Families should document what efforts it undertook to protect children and create a manual of lessons learned and new plans that address the equity challenges faced during COVID so that next time a public health emergency strikes, all children are better protected.

Invest in Students So They Can Get Ahead – The citizens and elected leaders of Philadelphia must focus on boosting funding for public schools so that all public schools have the resources to help students catch up and excel.

Close the Gap in Behavioral Health Services for Children and Youth – Philadelphia and its citizens must pressure the state to ensure that the city’s mental health services, those paid for by Community Behavioral Health, and private health care insurers are making it possible for children to readily access quality behavioral health services and remove barriers to mental health first aid, preventative supports, light touch counseling, and intensive best practice mental health therapy.

Protect Children from Poverty – To sustain the reduced levels of child poverty achieved during the pandemic, Philadelphians must push their federal lawmakers to reenact the expanded Child Tax Credit. Further, support must be rallied to continue the flexible enrollment policies in Medicaid, CHIP, and SNAP that protect children’s health and ensure their nutrition is never at risk.

Curb the Impact of Inflation on Families by Making Child Care More Affordable – The citizens of Philadelphia must increase the efforts made on their behalf in Washington and Harrisburg to deliver more resources so that families can afford high-quality, affordable child care and pre-k.

The Direct Impact of COVID on Philadelphia

The Virus Took a Real Toll on the Health of Children

Fortunately, the virus mostly spared children from the level of death and illness suffered by over 100 million fellow Americans. In Philadelphia, Alayna Thach (17 yrs), died as a result of contracting COVID and over 5,100 adults did as well. These deaths left children without siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and worse yet, one or both parents.⁹

Although children mostly escaped the virus' direct physical impact, the pandemic itself, coupled with the spike in gun violence, caused a mental health crisis for children that continues unabated.

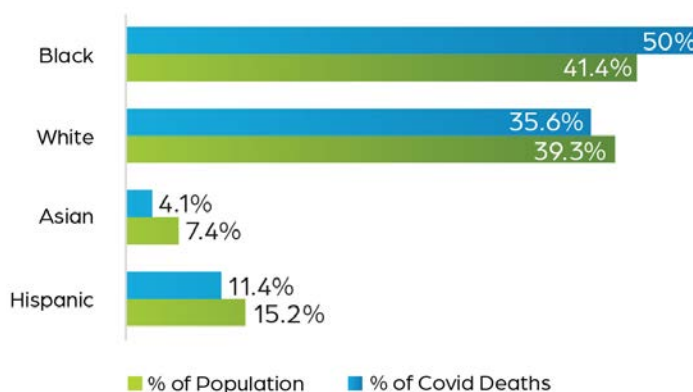
Across the country, mental health related emergency department visits spiked 31% for adolescents ages 12 to 17 from March 2019 to March 2021. Worse yet, emergency rooms treated 51% more teenage girls for attempted suicide than normal between Feb 2019 and Feb 2021.¹⁰ This data from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is sufficiently alarming to require substantial policy change.

The CDC also found that tens of thousands of children did not seek medical care for mental stress, but 44% of high school students reported feeling “persistently sad or hopeless” during the past year. This may be due to the fact that 29% of student respondents reported a parent or adult living in their home lost their job during the crisis.¹¹

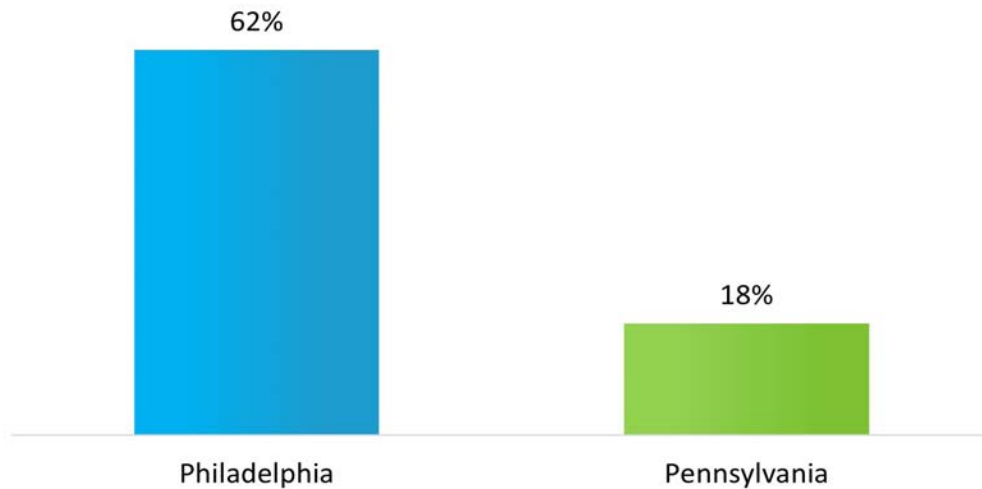
These findings may explain the latest data from Pennsylvania's Safe2Say hotline which provides students a confidential call for help when they are at risk of bullying, self-harm, drug use, or committing suicide. Prior to March 2020, 17% of tips received by the hotline for the 2019-20 school year were deemed a “life safety matter,” meaning a student's immediate physical well-being or safety is at risk.

During the remaining months of the 2019-20 school year, 37% of tips were life safety matters, demonstrating the mental strain the pandemic put on students. While statewide the hotline saw an 18% increase in tips relating to suicide from school years 2018-19 to 2019-20, Philadelphia saw a 62% increase over the same period.¹²

Deaths from COVID



Youth Suicide Calls Spike



Source: Safe2Say Something, Annual Reports 2018 – 2020

In spite of the city’s quasi-governmental behavioral health insurance agency, Community Behavioral Health, the availability of quality, culturally responsive mental health services were in short supply for children, especially for those insured by Medicaid or CHIP. The pandemic and its aftereffects have exposed the inadequacies of the national, state, and local behavioral health systems. All of which are taking a sustained toll on our children.

Urgent Recovery Need: City, state, and federal partners must assemble a team to remove payment and access barriers to mental health services for children and youth and reach agreement on quality standards so that children and youth can receive culturally competent preventive mental health services, mental health first aid, and intensive services for children suffering with mental illness.

Public Response to COVID Undermined Child Vaccine Adherence

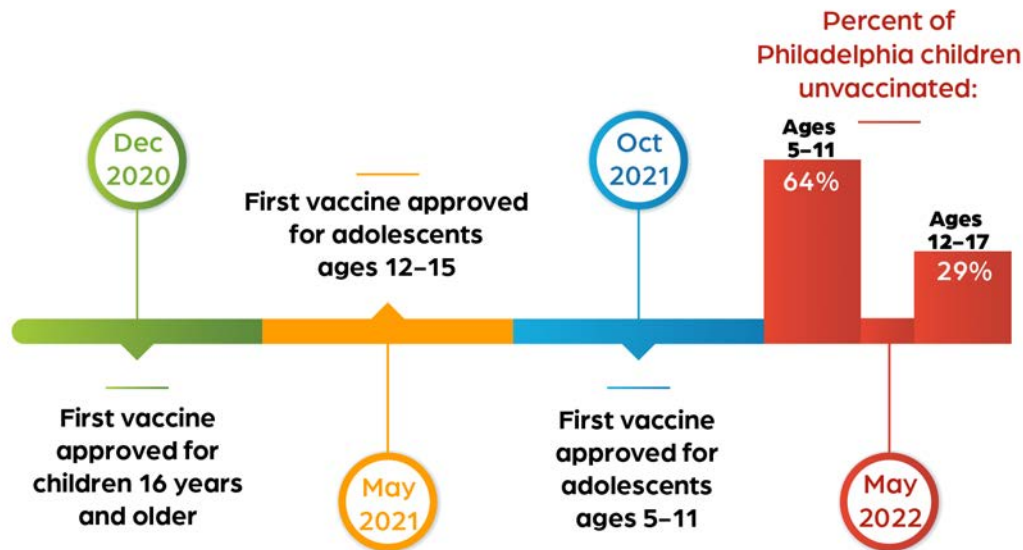
On the health care front, the one shred of good news is that Philadelphia residents heeded the advice of the CDC to get vaccinated. In fact, the percentage of residents fully vaccinated is 6% higher than the statewide average full vaccination rate.¹³

Yet, as of April 2022, 40% of children over eleven years old and 71% of children ages 5 to 11 years old were not fully vaccinated.



“The schoolhouse is not developing the mental well-being of our youth. We need more supports available in schools - that’s where our young people are going for help and the help is not there. I would love to see peer mental health advocates in schools; it is not a reality right now.” – Parent, Maurice Williams



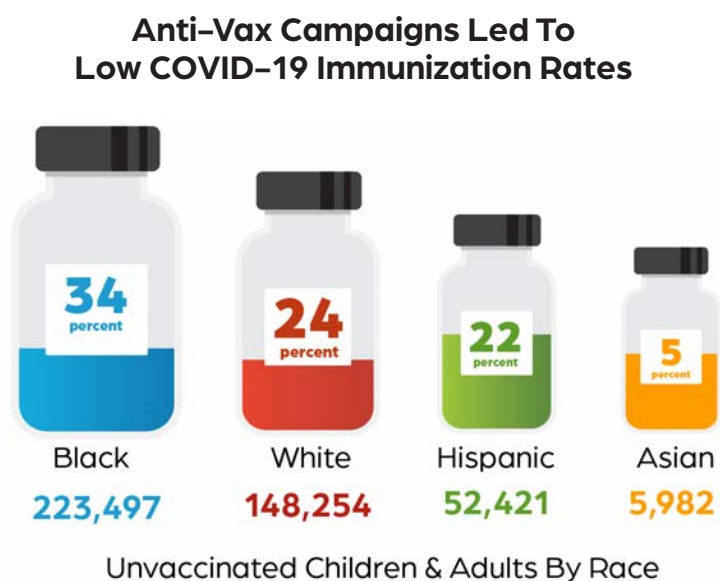


Additionally, Black residents of all ages are 10% less likely to be fully vaccinated than White residents, while Hispanic residents are 2% more likely to be vaccinated than White residents.¹⁴ To make matters worse, the ill-informed anti-vaccination campaign orchestrated across the country had an alarming impact on parental comfort with childhood immunizations. Almost 350 Philadelphia children were enrolled in the 2020-21 school year with an exemption from required immunizations due to philosophic objections, a 207% jump in the number of children exempted from basic immunizations compared to the 2018-19 school year.¹⁵

As the public health emergency wanes, parents will need much more guidance on the urgency, or lack thereof, to ensure their children are fully vaccinated against COVID. Time is of the essence when it comes to childhood disease prevention.

Urgent Recovery Need:

The Philadelphia Department of Public Health must ensure parents understand and embrace vaccine expectations so that all children in the city can be protected against preventable contagious childhood diseases. Further, the Department must carefully track COVID trends and work proactively to protect children from this virus and its mutations.



A Reinforced Safety Net Reduced Child Poverty

Federal COVID Relief Funds Lifted Children Out of Poverty

Over the two years living with the contagion, and within months of the pandemic shuttering the economy, Congress authorized a robust set of direct payments to families to support them during the crisis. Without question, these extraordinary and necessary resources for families staved off widespread homelessness, hunger, and deprivation.

The Child Tax Credit alone had an extraordinary positive impact, with over 16,000 of the city's children rising out of poverty between 2019 and 2020. While this trend was consistent among all of the five southeastern Pennsylvania counties, Philadelphia had an astonishing 16% decline in the number of children in poverty, the second largest percentage reduction in the region.¹⁶

In fact, the Child Tax Credit is estimated to have doubled the purchasing power of parents by putting over \$870 million into their hands in 2021 compared to the impact of the credit in 2019 when families received approximately \$486 million.¹⁷

On top of these payments to parents, the federal pandemic relief extended and enhanced unemployment payments that included a guaranteed \$600 a week for workers who were laid off due to COVID.¹⁸ The CARES Act also reimbursed employers for leave taken by employees who had to take care of a sick child or other dependent, marking the first-ever federal enactment of paid leave policy for parents.

Nearly all these benefits are no longer available, and, in most cases, their expiration makes sense. That's not the case for the Child Tax Credit, which came to an end December 15, 2021. Its expiration is likely to mean that thousands more children across the city will fall back into poverty.¹⁹

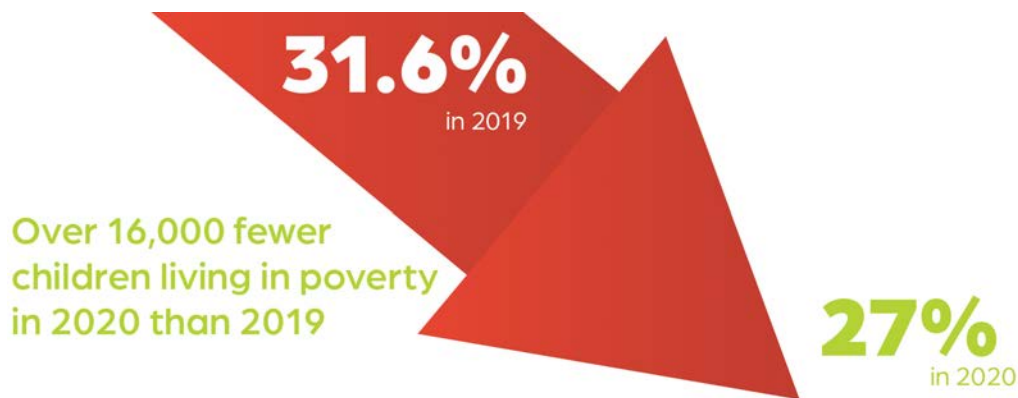
Meanwhile, data shows that men returned to work at three times the rate of women within the first 12 months of the pandemic.²⁰ As of February 2022, there were approximately 6,100 fewer women working in the city, mirroring the "she-cession" widely reported across the country, while the number of men working increased by about 3,100 compared to February 2020.²¹



“Those monthly payments gave me some breathing room. When you are living paycheck to paycheck, an unfortunate event, like a pipe in your house bursting can be a crisis if you don't have the cash to get it fixed. I was able to put food on the table and get things repaired in the home that I wouldn't have otherwise.” – Parker Ray, Parent



Historic One Year Drop in Child Poverty



These trends are especially troubling because, before the pandemic, nearly 73% of families had all present parents in the workforce, meaning 27% of Philadelphia families had only one or no source of income for their household.²²

Urgent Recovery Need: Child poverty stunts the healthy development of children with lifelong consequences that will be exacerbated by the pandemic's effect on children's lives. For this reason alone, all policy makers should agree that the Child Tax Credit must be reenacted.

Public Health Insurance Kept Children Healthy

Similarly, sound federal and state policies increased access to health insurance coverage for parents and children, providing a life preserver for parents who lost their job and, as a result, their health care coverage.

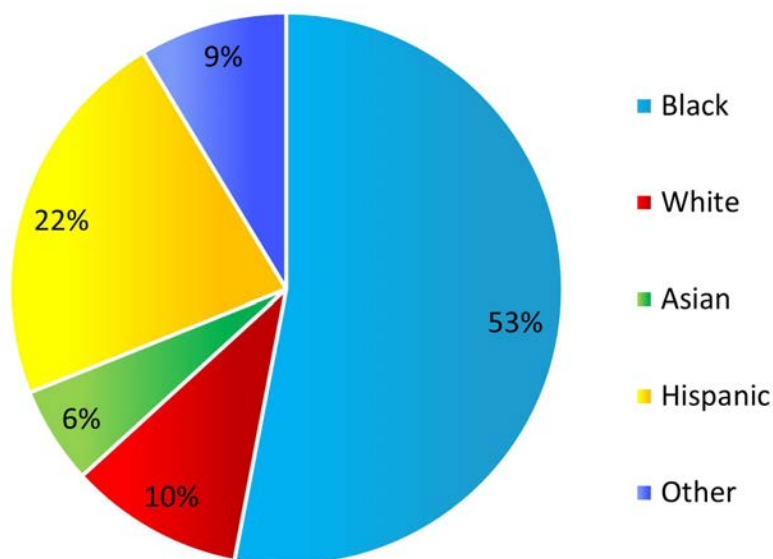
While reliance on public insurance is and should be a last resort, during COVID, employment related health care coverage rapidly evaporated as parents lost their jobs and employers cut costs. With federal aid, Pennsylvania was able to make sure most children didn't fall through the cracks by expanding health care coverage via Medicaid to 200,000 more children, representing a 17% increase from February 2020 to February 2022.²³ Now, Medicaid is the single largest health insurer for Pennsylvania children, with approximately 41% of all children living in the Commonwealth covered by its comprehensive health benefits, according to Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children.²⁴



"If I didn't qualify for Medical Assistance, she wouldn't have insurance. My daughter has pretty severe migraines and sees a specialist on a reoccurring basis. Without the insurance, I wouldn't be able to afford the medical care she needs. I wish we had CHIP for parents because I am without insurance right now; I take care of a sickly partner that's on Medicaid, which doesn't qualify me." — Yvette Newsome, Parent



Medicaid Was a Lifesaver for Children of Color



In Philadelphia during the pandemic, over 26,000 children were newly enrolled in Medicaid on top of the approximately 260,000 Philadelphia children already insured by the program. This represents a 10% expansion in public health insurance coverage for children.²⁵ Roughly three quarters of all children who get their health care through Medicaid in 2022 are Black (53%) or Hispanic (22%).

What lies ahead for these children is unclear. Some parents who lost health coverage due to COVID-related layoffs may return to jobs that don't offer health insurance. Many parents are already struggling to make ends meet due to the dual effects of temporary job loss and inflation, making it harder to cover household expenses and pay for health insurance.

Meanwhile, in response to the government largess offered during COVID, some state lawmakers are looking for ways to drive down government spending by shrinking the number of children and parents who can rely on Medicaid for health care coverage. While children of all races benefitted from the expansion, Black children are at greatest risk from a policy reversal. Nearly 30,000 more Black children in Philadelphia gained access to health care through Medicaid since 2019, a year before the pandemic started, more than any other race.²⁶

Urgent Recovery Need: Moderate- and low-income parents need the assurance that their children can rely on Medicaid. Thus, state and federal funds must continue to be available to ensure the continuity of their health care coverage.



Nearly 30,000 more Black children gained access to health care through Medicaid since 2019, a year before the pandemic started, more than any other race.



Abating Hunger Became a Priority

Federal flexibility enabled schools to provide school breakfasts, lunches, and snacks to children at home for the period of remote instruction. Where schools had to close or parents chose not to send their children to in-person instruction, parents were encouraged to come to the school to pick up meals. Some school districts also set up additional school meal distribution sites. Although children weren't attending in-person school for several months, over 340,000 Pennsylvania children had a midday meal thanks to the school lunch program and 210,000 started their day with free school breakfasts.²⁷ The city and school district mounted a monumental effort to ensure students were fed, distributing 7.7 million meals to children during the crisis.²⁸

Child SNAP Enrollment



Source: Pennsylvania Department of Human Services. Medical Assistance, Food Stamps, and Cash Assistance Statistics Report, February 2020 – February 2022.

Families also benefitted from new federal flexibility that permitted them access to the SNAP program to purchase food for themselves and their children. Nearly 6,200 more Philadelphia children were enrolled in SNAP, bringing childhood hunger relief via SNAP to over 172,000 children in the city. In fact, 7% more Philadelphia residents and 4% more children relied on SNAP during the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic enrollment from February 2020 to February 2022. As a result, in Philadelphia, over \$2.5 billion in SNAP funds went to families so they could purchase food during the pandemic.²⁹

Urgent Recovery Need: Although unemployment is low and wage rates are increasing, given the rapidly rising inflation rate, public policies that ensure no child is hungry must be maintained and invigorated. Congress must ensure continued access to food resources for children.

Troubling Signs On The Horizon For Those Who Teach Our Children

A Shortage of Child Care and Under-Resourced Schools Will Take a Lasting Toll on Children

It's safe to say that the city's economic recovery was fueled by the grit and determination of employers and employees who, on top of keeping local businesses viable, were caring for their children at home while schools and child care centers were shuttered. The city's effort to stand up more than 70 Access Centers where children could attend school remotely in community settings made it possible for the parents of approximately 1,200 children continue to work every day.³⁰

Sadly, over 90,000 Philadelphia residents resigned or lost their jobs in the first three months of the pandemic.³¹ To some extent, these job losses were a result of approximately 450 business closures across the city at the onset of the pandemic.³² Parents also left their jobs to care for children because there was no one else to tend to the first priority in their lives – their children. Once schools and child care centers reopened, thousands of parents were still unable to return to work because of health risks to them or a family member.

In large measure due to extraordinary federal and state financial supports for businesses, as of September 2021, the number of businesses in Philadelphia has largely recovered. And the official unemployment rate returned to the city's pre-pandemic level of 6% in April 2022.³³

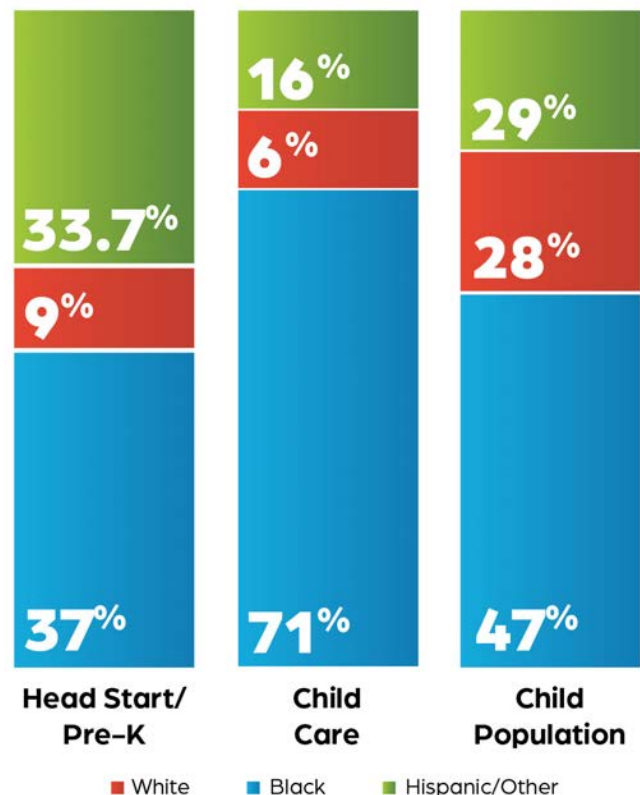
These traditional macro-economic indicators of economic recovery starkly contrast with the economic stress that families are feeling due to inflation and the weakened state of the critical partners they rely on to safely raise their children - child care centers and public schools.

Child Care Sector Suffers Long Lasting Impact of the Virus

The expiration of federal assistance and rising inflation means that more parents must work more to stay above water. Yet the shortage of child care is making it very hard to work more hours, or even simply go to work.

The average cost of full-time child care across the state is at least \$12,530 a year for infants or toddlers, \$10,640 for pre-school aged children, and \$9,800 for afterschool and summer care, and these costs are expected to continue to rise in 2022.³⁴

Early Learning Programs Serve Strong Proportion of Children of Color



Costs for child care in Philadelphia are higher than the state average costs. The the cost of caring for just one infant or two pre-school-aged children is likely to be more expensive than attending a year of college at Temple University.

Federal and state policymakers recognized the essential role of the child care sector by authorizing funds to subsidize child care program operations during the pandemic when programs were closed and/or had very low levels of enrollment. The goal of these funds was to avoid the permanent closure of programs since the supply of child care was already insufficient before the pandemic.

Yet, temporary federal and state policies were not robust enough to stem closures. Since the start of the pandemic, child care supply in the city has plummeted by 34% as of March 2022. In that period, 365 providers closed, including 29 high-quality programs.³⁵ Simply put, the child care sector has been decimated.

Child Care Centers Cannot Afford the Price of Hiring and Retaining Staff

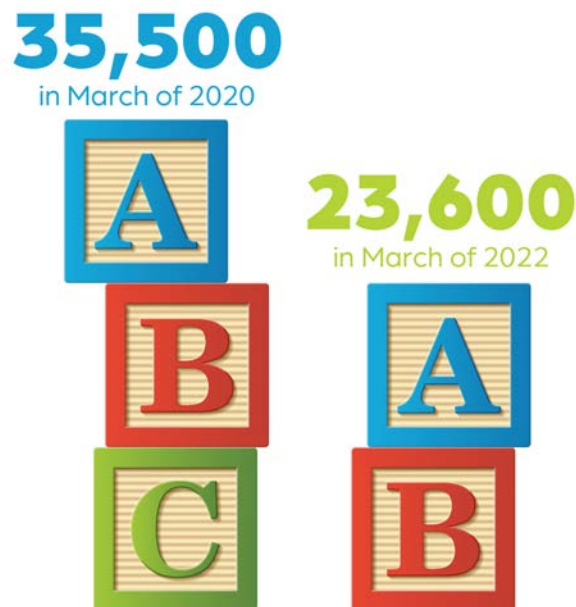
Child care costs are expected to keep rising as child care centers close due to the gap between what families can afford to pay, and in turn, what child care providers can afford to pay their staff.

As of September 2021, there were approximately 1,500 fewer child care workers in Philadelphia compared to the pre-pandemic level. This massive exodus is a result of low wages coupled with the risk and stress of caring for children during the pandemic.

As of December 2021, average wages for all workers in the city rose by approximately 14%, but the median wage for child care staff has remained stubbornly low.

Child care staff were earning 19% less than employees at big box retail stores or fast food franchises as of September 2021.³⁶

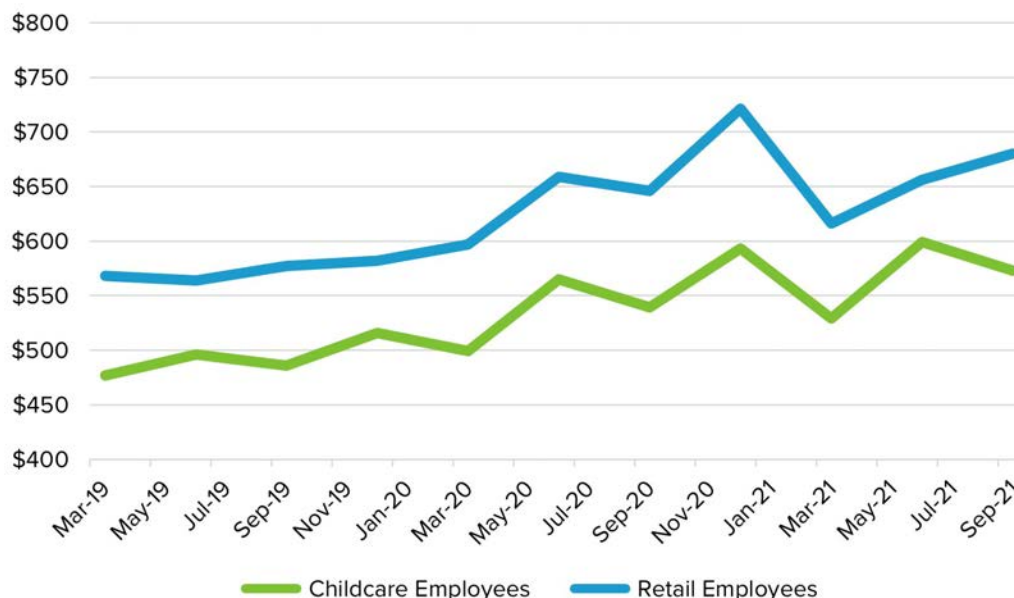
Child Care Supply Plummet



"I have found a career that I am passionate about and equally good at. I want to continue to work in early childhood education, but I need to be able to provide for my own child too. I simply do not make enough to meet the demands of my bills and I have both a bachelor's and master's degree." – Parent, Samantha Rodriguez



Child Care Wages Trail Retail Industry By More Than 19% Per Week



Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages, 2019 – 2021.

If child care centers increase the tuition charged to parents to cover the rate of pay needed to attract qualified staff, it will put the cost of child care further out of reach for families and drive down enrollment. It's a vicious cycle that is devastating the child care sector, making it very difficult for parents to earn a living and for employers to hire the workers they need.

The economic prospects of Philadelphia parents, like parents across America, are suffering due to the absence of sound public policies that ensure high-quality child care is available to fully spur economic recovery and growth.

Urgent Recovery Need: Increases in federal and state funds are essential to expand access to great child care that parents can rely on so they can work sufficient hours to support their families.

Schools Started Out Behind, Now Struggle to Catch Up

One of the biggest shocks ever to the American public education system occurred when schools were shuttered to avoid COVID contagion, and 52 million Americans reported their children were attending school virtually, accounting for 67% of all K-12 students.³⁷ The abrupt shift to virtual instruction was hard on faculty, parents, and students. Children suffered from social isolation and their academic and social development suffered.³⁸ While these trends were universal, some students had it worse than others. In Philadelphia, 60% of all K-12 students attend schools run by the Philadelphia School District. The experience of the majority of students in the city is instructive.

Fortunately there is some uniform data available to assess the impact of the educational shock on these students. However, students who attended parochial or charter schools could have had markedly different experiences during the pandemic and since.

In Philadelphia, the school district halted in-person classes between March and June 2020, with virtual learning remaining in place for much of the 2020-21 school year. Many of the charter and private schools in the city and suburban schools were able to rapidly rely on virtual instruction because their students already had school-issued computers to take home. Philadelphia district-run public schools, however, had neither the inventory of computers, nor the tech capacity to make a that shift quickly. Schools were shuttered on March 20th and online instruction started in May. Initially 79% of students participated in online classes that started on May 3rd. Participation dropped weekly, dipping to 42% four weeks later at the end of the school year, according to the District's Office of Research and Evaluation.

Philadelphia's experience was not unique. Across the country, in large measure, successful virtual learning became dependent on a parent's income. Startling national data indicates that 40% of American parents were responsible for the cost of buying a computer for their child's virtual learning.

Fortunately, the school district rapidly purchased 50,000 computers and, with what they had in stock, distributed 82,239 laptops to students, providing a tool for 66% of students to do schoolwork at home, according to the School District of Philadelphia's Office of Evaluation, Research, and Accountability. However, the District's teachers' survey found that 44% of teachers reported that their students were not able to fully participate in the first month of virtual instruction due to a lack of internet access.³⁹

About one in three students in the Philadelphia School District, where 74% of students are from low-income households and 86% are students of color, did not have high speed internet access, according to estimates based on a Pew Research study.⁴⁰ The internet/tech divide is most pronounced among low-income Hispanic families with school-aged children. Fourteen percent of households didn't have a computer in 2021 and a quarter of all Black households were in the same boat.⁴¹

To address this access gap, the City launched PHLConnectED to get students internet access during the school year with a \$7 million donation from Comcast Corporation. The effort eventually connected 19,000 students to broadband services, enabling them to attend classes virtually during the shutdown.⁴²

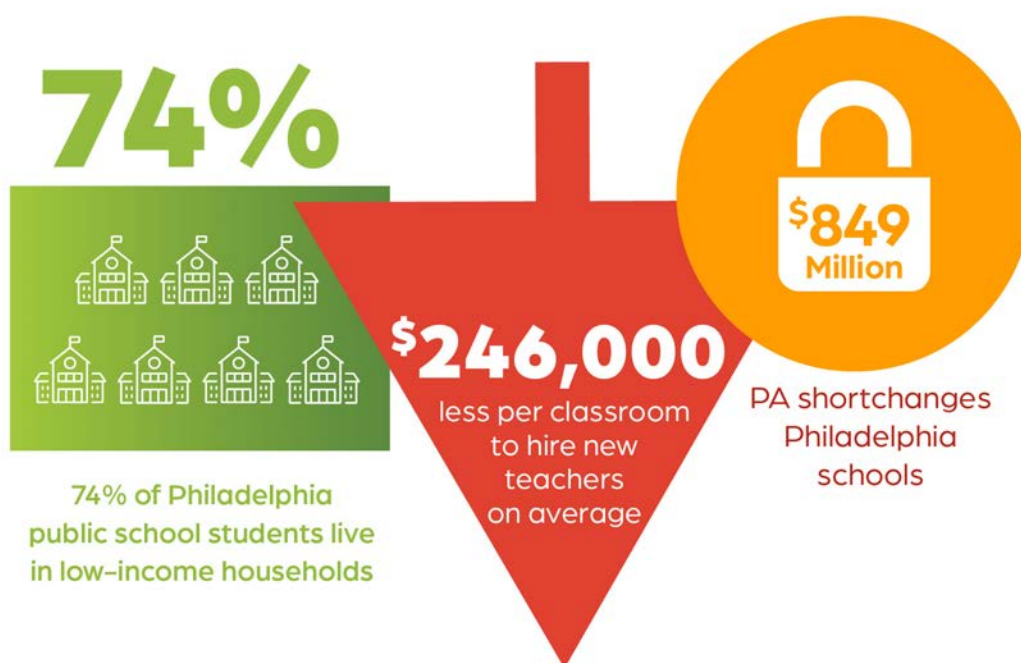


"My son is a visual learner and needs in-person instruction to thrive. When the pandemic happened, his teachers were not equipped for virtual instruction. How do we adjust for the gap - my son went a year and half without virtual instruction? I'm not a teacher by trade, so there was only so much I could do to support his learning at home." – Parent, Sir-Jaz Car Watson



To help families unfamiliar with technology connect their children to school, the City also funded three organizations to serve as digital navigators, who by the end of 2021, had assisted 2,000 families make digital connections.⁴³

Despite these efforts, the interruption of learning compounded the already dire educational gaps across school districts in the state, hitting Philadelphia especially hard.



Before COVID struck, 73% of Philadelphia public school students were failing to meet basic English and math targets at the key 3rd and 8th grade benchmarks.⁴⁴ It's safe to say that things got worse for these students during COVID.

Yet, an extensive educational assessment of 1.6 million students across the country found that, on average, students had fallen five months behind in math and four months behind in reading by the end of the 2020-21 school year.⁴⁵

Meanwhile there is a dearth of reliable data to prove that Pennsylvania's children lost ground. The Commonwealth did require public schools to participate in the state assessments in 2021. However, thousands of students were exempted from the tests because their schools were still closed for in-person instruction. As a result, the Pennsylvania Department of Education cautioned policymakers, school leaders, and parents to not rely on the results as a valid measure of school or student performance.

The School District's Office of Evaluation and Research analysis of student reading proficiency found that the percentage of 2nd to 5th grade students who tested at or above grade level declined significantly from Fall 2020 to Fall 2021.

However in that period the District adopted a new assessment system which may account for the drop in student performance. The SY 2022 PSSA results will provide the clearest picture of how COVID effected student learning. Those results are expected in the Fall of 2022.

Schools Don't Have the Resources to Catch Up

Most of the onus to respond to the months of lost learning falls on public schools. Yet school districts entered the 2021-22 school year with record high teacher resignations and too few newly trained teachers to take their place. This teacher shortage crisis had been getting worse over time and was dramatically accelerated by the pandemic.

National data indicates that 48% of school districts struggled to hire enough full-time teachers, while 55% struggled to hire paraprofessionals, and 77% struggled to find substitute teachers, according to a 2021 EdWeek Research Center survey.⁴⁶

Add to that challenge the fact that far fewer newly trained teachers are entering the field. In fact, since the 2013-14 school year, Pennsylvania has seen a 42% decline in new teaching certificates and a 425% increase in type 1 emergency teaching permits. Type 1 emergency permits are issued in response to a "vacant teaching position with an educational obligation to pursue."⁴⁷



"As a previous Facilities Engineer for the School District of Philadelphia, I witness firsthand how classrooms were overcrowded and out of control! It was no fault of the teachers; there were just too many kids in classrooms. It would be a lot for anyone." – Parent, Harry Cassel



New Teachers in Short Supply

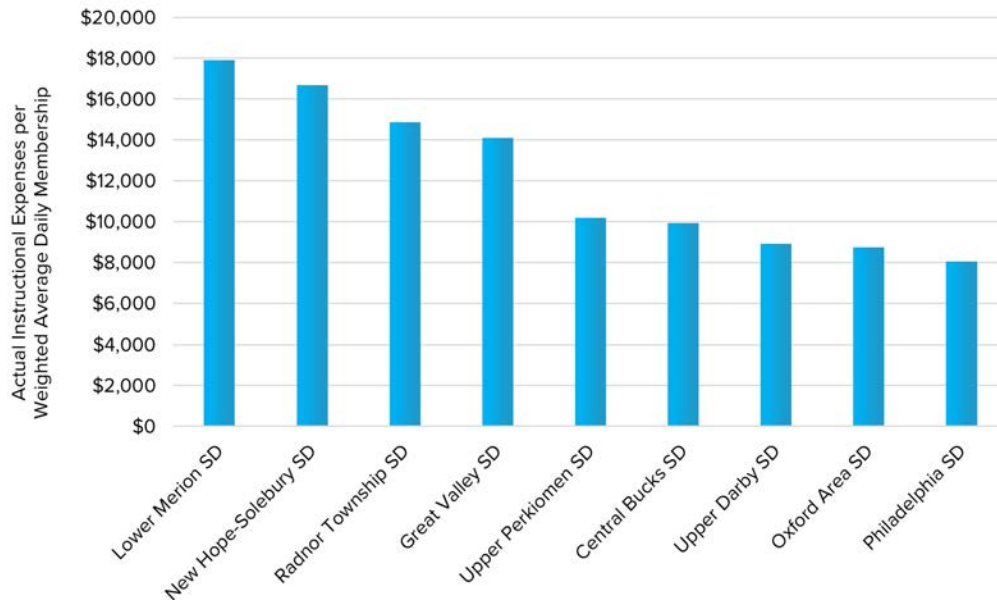


Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education, Educator Preparation and Certification Report, 2010 – 2021.

Teacher salaries are highly dependent on the wealth of the local community in Pennsylvania because the amount that a school district can spend is so heavily dependent on property taxes. That means that staffing shortages are likely to be most severe in districts that are lower wealth communities. These districts are not likely to be able to offer a competitive salary to attract sufficient teachers to fill their vacancies.

With less funding, Philadelphia will likely have to increase class sizes because they won't have sufficient funds to hire new teachers, given the shortage. Due to the vagaries of the state system of funding schools, Philadelphia public schools have less funding available for instruction per student than any school district in each of the four surrounding counties.

A \$10,000 Per Student Gap In Educational Resources Compared to Some Districts



Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education. Annual Financial Report Data, Expenditure Data, 2015 – 2019.

The largest funding gap in resources in the region is between Philadelphia and its neighboring district Lower Merion School District.⁴⁸

Specifically, the School District of Philadelphia receives about \$8,000 per student for instruction, and its student body has five times more low-income students⁴⁹ and three times more students of color than their peers in Lower Merion, which has about \$18,000 per student to educate its pupils.⁵⁰ This data alone illustrates the irrational methodology used to fund public education in Pennsylvania.

Highest Poverty Schools Linked to Lowest PSSA Performance



PSSA Performance = Average percent of third and eighth grade students earning advanced or proficient on English or Math PSSA exams from 2015 through 2019. Source: Pennsylvania Department of Education. Annual Financial Reports, Expenditure Data, 2019 – 2020. Public Schools Percent of Low-Income Reports, 2019 – 2020.

These financial and economic disparities were pronounced before COVID where students in the city were also, unsurprisingly, much further behind academically than the students in Lower Merion or any of the other districts with more resources in the state. This trend holds true across the majority of districts in the state – the higher the poverty rate of the district, the fewer resources schools have to educate their students, and the further behind the students are academically.

Just as the pandemic has taken a toll on the academic achievement of diverse students and those who are lower income than their peers, the teacher shortage and insufficiency of state funding for lower-wealth school districts means that students of color in Philadelphia will likely continue to be shortchanged and as a result fall further behind.

Urgent Recovery Need: There is no temporary solution to the learning loss for students in Philadelphia. One-time grants for tutoring to help students catch up are a short-term fix and will leave far too many future graduates unprepared for a real-world job or college. State funds to close the educational resource gap are urgently needed to solve the city's root educational disparity.

Recommendations

Federal, state, and local vigilance flattened infection rates which thankfully protected children and most of the adults in their lives. Throughout the crisis there were obvious missed opportunities to meet the needs of children and, as the crisis abates, its lingering effects on children still warrant the attention and action of federal, state, and county officials. To this end, we recommend the following:

Put Children First During a Crisis. Because children are especially vulnerable and have such a broad set of needs, the city would be well-served sustain the Office of Children and Families and ensure the Office creates a detailed crisis response manual for meeting the needs of children in the event of a crisis. School districts, local social service agencies, and city offices can and must operate more efficiently and proactively to meet the needs of children in a time of crisis and city leadership is essential to making that happen.

Recommendation: The City should craft a strategy and sustain the Office of Children and Families to ensure children are better protected the next time a public health emergency strikes.

Make a Great Public Health System A Priority. One of the lessons learned from the pandemic is the need to rally behind the critical role that public health systems play and continually invest in keeping those systems modern and ready to respond in the time of crisis.

Recommendation: City leaders and local medical professionals will need to be vigilant and build support for the health department so it has the resources to protect and provide care for residents every day and during a crisis. Further, the city must also continue to track the continuous impact of COVID on children to address troubling trends and proactively implement strategies that boost child vaccination against COVID and other diseases.

Close the Gap in Behavioral Health Services for Children and Youth. Nearly one in five children suffer from a mental, emotional, or behavioral disorder. Alarming, less than half of these youth receive treatment, with children of color receiving the least access to care for their conditions according to the National Institute of Mental Health.⁵¹ Further, recent survey data on youth finds that 37% of the responding teens said they had poor mental health during the pandemic and 44% said they felt “persistently” sad or hopeless.⁵² At these rates, upwards of 35,000 teens in Philadelphia are likely to need mental health support, and the sooner they receive it, the less likely it is for their mental health issues to develop into chronic conditions.

Recommendation: The City, the quasi-public agency, Community Behavioral Health, and school leaders must work together and enlist the support of the state to create more robust school-based behavioral health services that are high-quality, accessible, and culturally responsive, and offer a full menu of preventative mental health resources, mental health first aid, and therapeutic supports for children and youth in their communities.

Protect Children From Poverty. Before COVID struck, seven in ten families were earning too little to cover the basics of raising and caring for their children, according to the 2019 Children First report, *Underwater: What’s Sinking Families in Philadelphia*.⁵³ In the midst of COVID, the United Way of Pennsylvania surveyed families and found that 64% of families who were struggling to secure basic needs, housing expenses were among their biggest concerns.⁵⁴ To make matters worse, families also faced the economic shock of the pandemic, with inflation jumping by over 11% between February 2020 and February 2022.⁵⁵ Today, over one-quarter (26%) of Philadelphia homeowners and half (48%) of renters spend 30% or more of their income on housing.⁵⁶ Fortunately, during the crisis, the city launched PHLRentAssist, a nationally recognized eviction protection program, that helped 10,000 Philadelphia households.⁵⁷ But as rents rise and the housing supply gets tighter, more families with children will find suitable housing difficult to afford, putting the safety of children at grave risk.

Parents earning less than the median wage have far less purchasing power. That is why the federal Child Tax Credit, lifting more than 23,000 Philadelphia children out of poverty, was crucial in enabling families with limited incomes to meet more of their immediate household expenses.⁵⁸

Recommendation: To sustain the reduced levels of child poverty achieved during the pandemic, citizens of Philadelphia and every elected leader at the state and local level must push their federal lawmakers to reenact the expanded Child Care Tax Credit.

Curb the Impact of Inflation on Families by Making Child Care More Affordable

The child care crisis is directly affecting the economic stability and growth of Philadelphia. As of December 2021, an estimated 53,000 jobs were unfilled in the city.⁵⁹ Even if parents want to take these jobs, there simply isn't enough child care capacity to enable them to do so.

In many ways, the child care sector is the canary in the coal mine with respect to expected trends post-COVID. Substantial COVID relief was available to help child care programs remain open during the pandemic. Now, without those resources, the child care sector is collapsing. To help parents return to the workforce, public policies must support the rebuilding of the child care infrastructure lost during the pandemic.

Recommendation: The citizens of Philadelphia must increase the efforts made on their behalf in Washington and Harrisburg to ensure more resources are made available so families can afford high quality, affordable child care and pre-k.

Invest in Students So They Can Get Ahead Most students are still behind in school because of COVID. Prior to the pandemic, most the schools in the city were struggling to help all students meet basic academic benchmarks, so they entered the pandemic shutdowns already far behind. When COVID struck, 66% of Philadelphia's public school students could not read at the 3rd grade level when they entered fourth grade, and 64% could not read at the 8th grade level when they entered ninth grade.⁶⁰

Recommendations: The citizens of Philadelphia must unite and demand that state lawmakers deliver sufficient funds so that every school can afford to hire an ample supply of teachers, and provide every student with a computer and, where necessary, free or affordable internet access. To achieve these goals, every state lawmaker should be on the record for supporting an end to the school funding crisis in the Commonwealth and supportive of a strategy to close the state's \$4.6 billion school funding deficit.

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