



A DECADE OF STALLED PROGRESS

*OPPORTUNITY STUNTED
FOR CHILDREN IN BUCKS COUNTY*



*A Children First
Report on Bucks County*

February 2025

children
FIRST
THE ADVOCATE FOR KIDS

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Introduction

Bucks County is home to approximately 127,000 children.¹ Fortunately, most of these children are being raised in homes that offer them tremendous opportunities and they live in communities and attend schools that are boosting their prospects. Yet a third of children are much less fortunate, living in families that can't afford to meet their needs without going into debt or going without essentials.² These children mostly live in communities where the schools have insufficient funds to ensure the success of their students. In addition, the resources to meet the health care, early learning, and family supports are far short of what is needed to help at least 26,400 children in Bucks County achieve their full potential.³ These children are concentrated in a handful of communities that require a renewed effort to give every child in the county the great childhoods they deserve.

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

ECONOMIC FAST FACTS FOR BUCKS COUNTY

26,400 children live in families earning too little to meet their needs

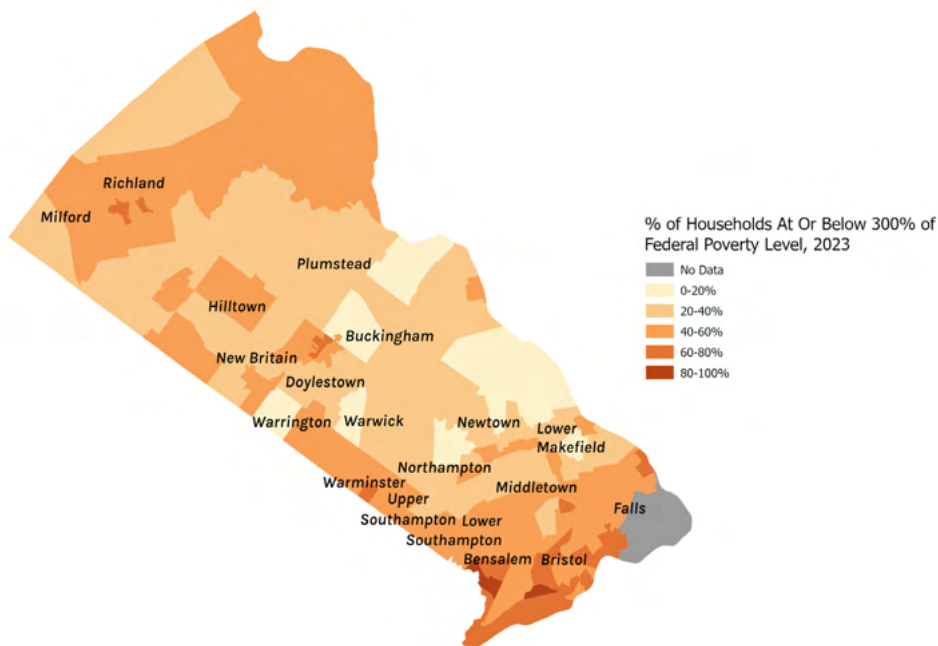
33% of all families with children are earning less than needed

Families with two children need to earn \$86,268 or much more if they have child care costs

9% of families report being food insecure

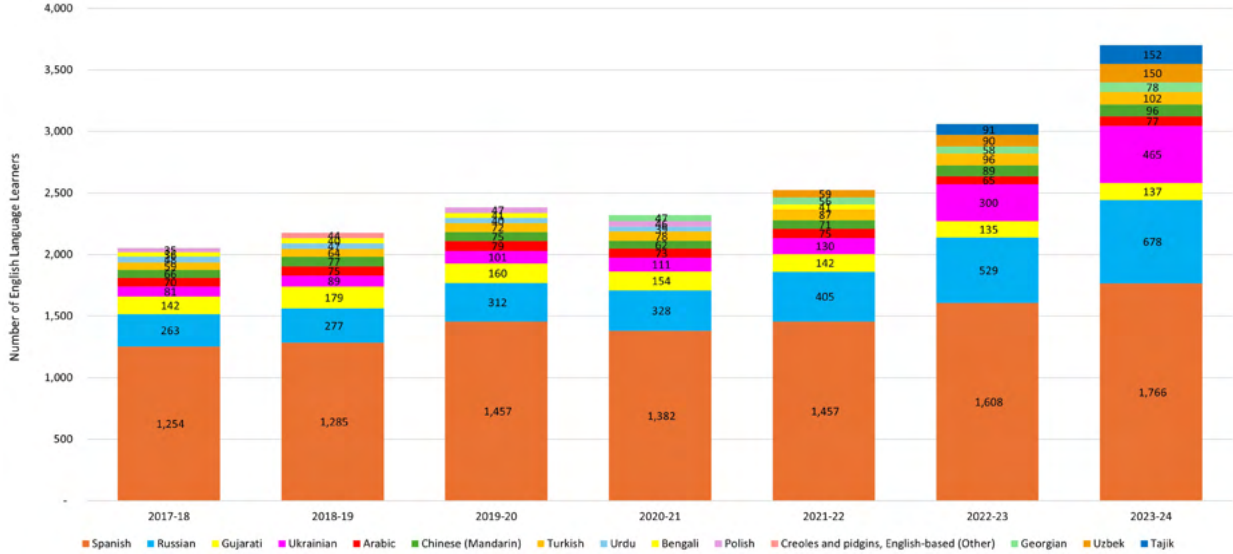
Families earning the least only gained \$680 of purchasing power in the last decade

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



Bucks County’s children are more diverse today than they were ten years ago as the share of Asian children edged up by two percentage points and the share of Hispanic children increased by three percentage points in the decade, boosting the numbers of children of color by about 6,059 compared to 2014.⁵ About 26% of Bucks County’s children are non-white - the lowest share of racial diversity in the southeastern Pennsylvania region – compared to 21% a decade ago.

The Cultural Heritage of Children in Bucks County Became More Diverse from 2017-2018 to 2023-2024 ⁶



Often large demographic categories obscure the diverse cultural heritages included in them. For example, the changes in racial demographics in Bucks County hide the upsurge of children from Russia and Ukraine over the past decade. Historically, Bucks County experienced an influx in Ukrainian and Russian immigrants between 1990 and 2010.⁷ This trend continued in the late 2010s and increased in the mid-2020s following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

While more cultural and ethnic communities are increasingly calling Bucks County home, Hispanic children account for the fastest growing newcomers. There were 1,766 children whose first language is Spanish enrolled in public schools in the 2024 school year, an increase of 512 students since 2018.⁸ This was followed by an increase of 415 and 384 students whose first language is Russian and Ukrainian, respectively.

The increasing diversity in the county requires greater cultural competence among child-serving institutions for children to succeed.

The Official Poverty Measure Masks Real Economic Hardship

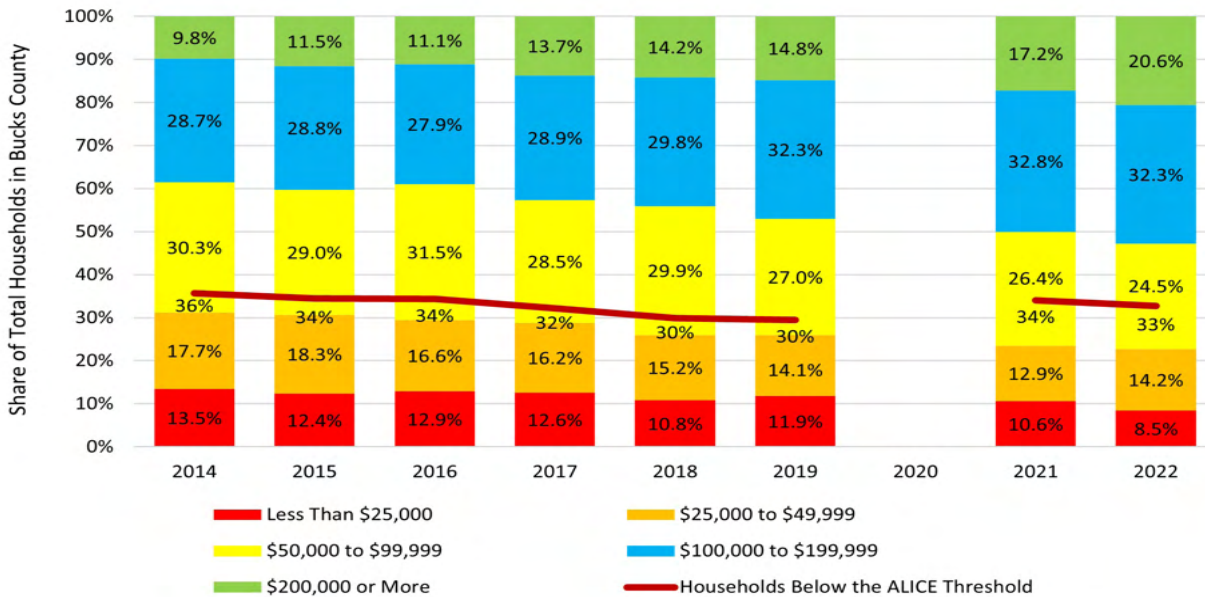
Too many families of all races and ethnicities are facing economic hardship in the county. The method used by the U.S. Bureau of the Census to measure poverty, while useful, is not robust enough to fully describe the relationship between the income earned by a household and the cost of living for that 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.⁹

The average family of four in Bucks County would need to make \$86,268 to afford the basics.

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

This robust ALICE measure finds that a family of two adults and two children would need to make \$86,268, or more than two times the official federal poverty measure, to afford the basics of rent, food, transportation, health insurance, and other essentials.¹¹ If the family needs child care so the parents can work, their earnings would need to rise to \$105,096.

Over 30% of Families with Children are Below the ALICE Threshold in Bucks County¹²



Until the COVID pandemic, the share of children living in families earning too little to meet their needs trended downward, reaching a low of 30% in 2019.¹³ In the wake of supply shortages and inflation following the pandemic, however, one-third of families found themselves short of what is needed to support their children based on the latest data from 2022. As a result, it is not a surprise that the share of families reporting food insecurity increased from 5% to 9% between 2021 and 2022, the first increase since 2017.¹⁴

Families are increasingly turning to public benefits to meet their basic needs. Approximately 17,886 Bucks County children relied on SNAP benefits to avoid hunger, up 10% compared to 2014.¹⁵ Similarly, the number of children benefiting from WIC was at a five-year high of 3,538 in 2024.¹⁶

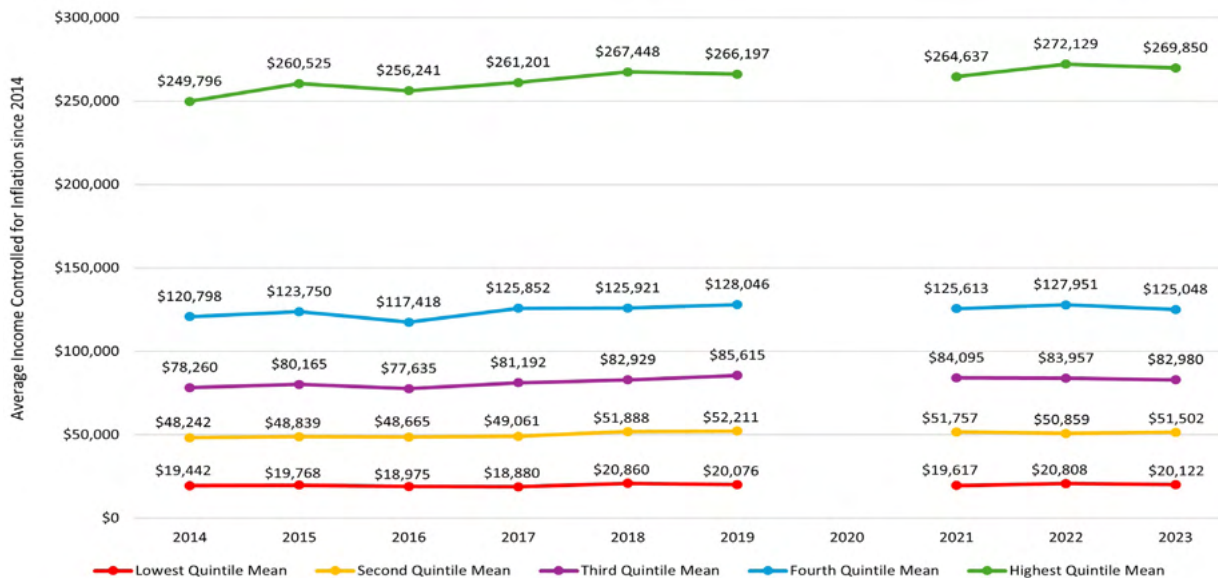
The number of homeless students in Bucks County fluctuated for most of the past decade but saw its highest counts in the last two school years despite ostensibly robust income growth in the county.¹⁷ Eight hundred children were estimated to be homeless in the 2024 school year. This number is likely a low estimate, given the many workarounds caregivers use to avoid shelters or living on the street, like couch surfing or short-term stays with family or friends.¹⁸

Wage Growth Fails to Outpace Inflation

The shockingly high and stubborn number of children living in struggling families, and rising hunger and homelessness rates stand in stark contrast to the overall income distribution trends in the county. In the last decade, more people earn over \$50,000 (up from 69% to 77%) and the number of people earning over \$200,000 a year more than doubled.¹⁹

Although most working adults in Bucks County earned more over the decade, typically any financial boost was wiped out by rapidly increased costs for basic goods and services. After accounting for inflation, the poorest 20% of county residents experienced a net growth of \$680 in annual purchasing power in the last decade despite their incomes increasing by 35% in that same period.²⁰ The next lowest 20% income group saw a \$3,260 boost in annual purchasing power despite wage growth increasing over \$19,000 within the decade. In contrast, the top 20% saw their purchasing power grow by \$20,054 in the same period.²¹

Income Growth Continues to be Inequitably Distributed in Bucks County²²



Unfortunately, the share of children living in economically stressed households has not dropped in the last decade even while the nation experienced a strong and sustained period of economic growth. The policy strategies in place are clearly insufficient to ensure low-wealth caregivers can increase their earning capacity and thereby make the lives of their children demonstrably better.

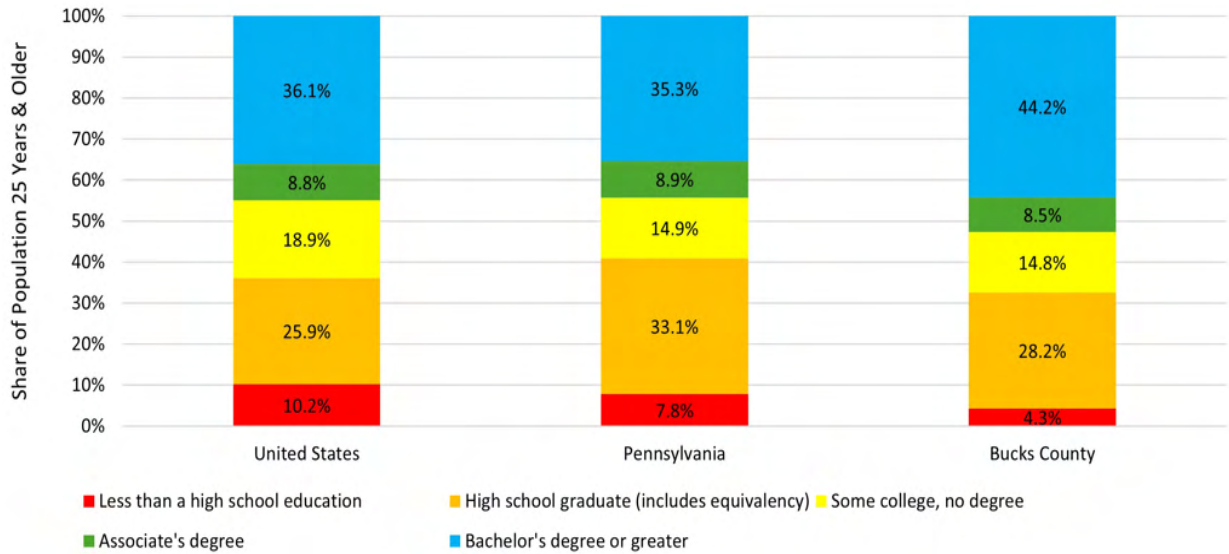
Educational Attainment Challenges Hold Back Economic Prospects

National data demonstrates that adults can substantially boost their earnings capacity if they have some post-secondary training or education.²³ In Bucks County, the earnings of families where at least one adult completed some college were 10% higher than households where at least one adult had just a high school diploma.²⁴ Where a caregiver had a four-year degree their earning capacity rose by more than two-thirds compared to households where at least one caregiver lacked a diploma.

Fortunately, more Bucks County children are likely to be raised by a parent with at least some college or post-secondary education compared to ten years ago. Nearly 68% of Bucks County adults now have some post high school education or training compared to 63% ten years ago.²⁵ That is over 37,000 more adults with at least some form of a post-secondary education. Similarly promising, the number of adults with a high school degree rose by more than 33,000 over the decade.

Most promising is the increase of adults with four or more years of college, up by six percentage points, or 40,500 more adults over the decade.²⁶

The Share of Bucks County Adults with Undergraduate or Post-Graduate Degrees is Higher than the National Share ²⁷



As of 2023, Bucks County adults were more likely to have a college education than all adults across the state and the nation.²⁸ This positive trend may explain the jump in the median household income from approximately \$78,000 to \$107,000 from 2014 to 2023.²⁹

Given the rising demands of the labor market, which is increasingly rewarding job seekers with some college, too many adults with just a high school diploma or less are in poverty. This data suggests that real barriers to secondary and post-secondary education pathways persist, limiting the capacity of more than 17,100 adults in Bucks County to rise into the middle class based on the latest data from 2023.³⁰

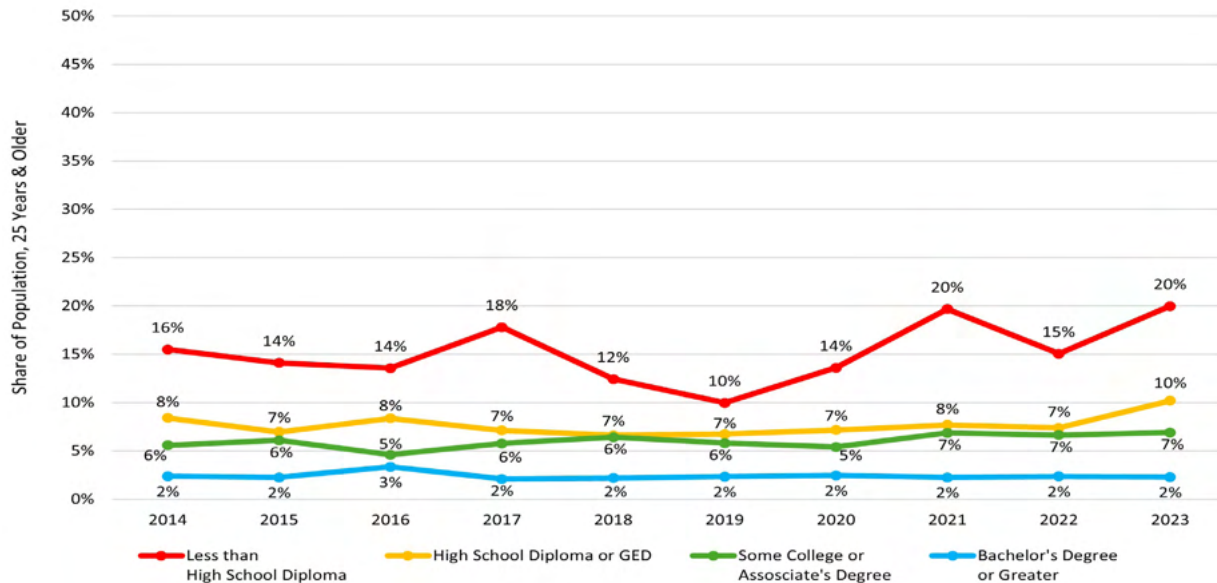
For every person with a high school diploma or less, there are two people with at least some form of a post-secondary education in Bucks County, available to fulfill the increasing demands of the labor market. This may explain why the county's unemployment rate has trended consistently lower than the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



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



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



Likewise, the county’s poverty rate for all adults has consistently held below the adult poverty rate for the overall state. Despite this, the child poverty rate in Bucks County is greater than the poverty rate for all adults, mirroring the similar conditions in its neighboring counties and the state. Based on the latest available data from 2023, roughly 8% of the county’s children lived in poverty compared to 7% of all adults.³³

Volatility of Federal Tax Policy Hurts Families

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

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

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



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



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

In Pennsylvania, the impact was even greater, with child poverty rates reduced by 46%.³⁵ In Bucks County, families across the board benefited from \$182 million through this refundable tax policy.³⁶ Bucks County families also benefited from \$23 million in savings through the refundable child and dependent care tax credit policy. Survey research shows that families spent most funds on food, clothing, and school supplies.^{37,38}

Unfortunately, both expanded tax policies expired, robbing tens of thousands of children the life-changing impacts of increased economic security. Recently, statewide efforts tried to offset these impacts by nearly tripling the state-level Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit, which will benefit 13,730 Bucks County families.³⁹

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



Early Childhood Education

High-quality and affordable child care is critical to boosting the economic conditions in low-wealth households by enabling caregivers to work. Families languish on waitlists for child care, while early childhood providers struggle to find enough qualified staff to open up classrooms. In addition, Pennsylvania loses \$6.65 billion annually because of breakdowns in the sector.⁴⁰ This dysfunction in the child care sector has serious implications for Bucks County's economy.

Policies to Support New Parents are Absent

As parents are welcoming a newborn baby, they shouldn't be forced to choose between bonding with their child or going back to work. Paid family leave allows parents to provide better care during a child's critical early developmental stages, which leads to improved health. Statewide, 66% of businesses in Pennsylvania do not offer their employees paid family and medical leave. In 2022, 3,687 Bucks County newborns went home to parents who did not have access to paid leave, forcing thousands of families to give up their hard-earned savings and risk poverty.⁴¹ 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 BUCKS COUNTY

33,890 children under the age of five years old

4,210 children eligible for Child Care Works (child care subsidy)

52% of eligible children are NOT enrolled in Child Care Works

41% of child care providers are high-quality and they serve over half of eligible children (66%)

4,140 children are eligible for high-quality publicly funded pre-k

59% of eligible children are NOT enrolled in publicly funded pre-k

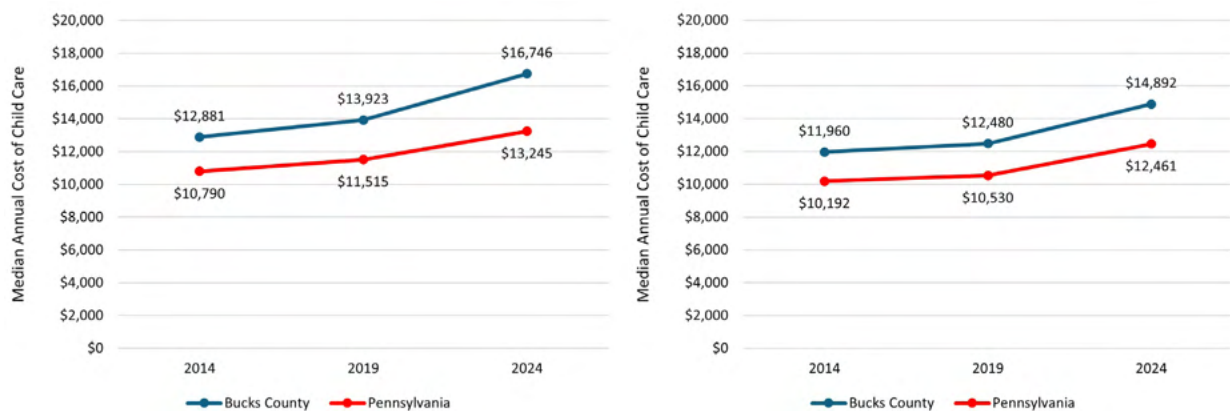
91 unfilled staff positions in child care programs

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

Without Help, Families Really Struggle to Cover Costs

Bucks County is home to 33,890 children under the age of five, and their parents face steep costs when it comes to early education and care.⁴² County residents pay \$3,501 more for infant care than the rest of Pennsylvania; toddler care costs \$2,431 more.⁴³ Little progress has been made to bring those costs down. In fact, infant care costs in Bucks County increased by 30% and toddler care rose nearly 25% from 2013 to 2024. In 2024, the average family spent almost 16% of their household budget on infant care, more than twice the federal recommendation of 7%.⁴⁴

The Median Annual Cost of Infant or Toddler Child Care is More Expensive in Bucks County than the Average Statewide Cost⁴⁵



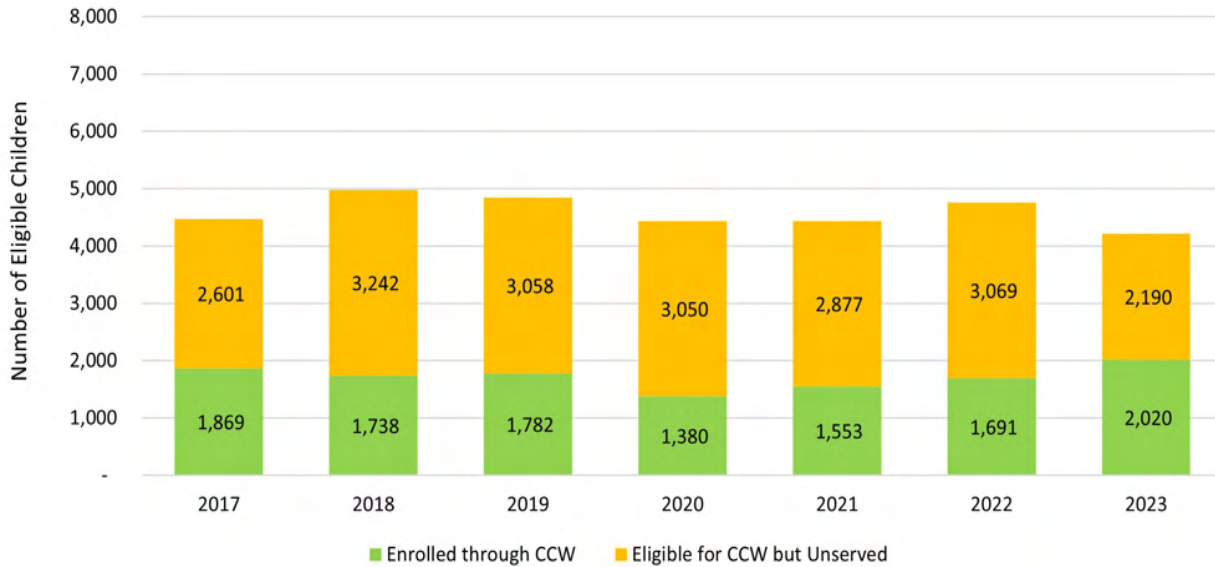
Given the high out-of-pocket cost of child care, state programs like Child Care Works, which provides subsidies to low-income working families, can be a game changer – offsetting the cost of care so parents can work while their children are cared for and educated. Yet 52% of eligible children are not enrolled in Child Care Works.⁴⁶ This is mainly because child care providers have a hard time recruiting and retaining staff and, as a result, must limit the number of children they can serve.

Staffing Shortages Cut Supply

Even though the number of providers in Bucks County has remained stable, chronic staffing shortages have forced providers to close classrooms and turn away 977 children in 2024, a number equivalent to two entire public elementary schools.⁴⁷ The reduced capacity of providers to serve more children continues to hold back any progress that was made to increase access to child care over the past ten years.

Low salaries are the primary driving factor for the staffing shortage. The average pay for child care staff in Bucks County was \$31,515 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.⁴⁸

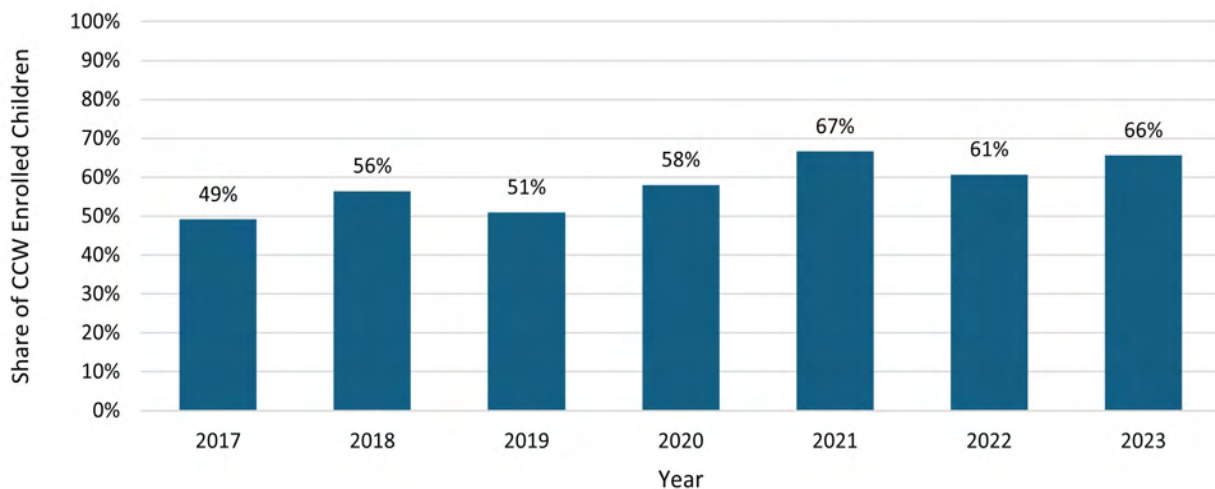
52% of Eligible Children in Bucks County Cannot Enroll in Subsidized Care Because of Persistent Staffing and Provider Shortages ⁴⁹



Their counterparts in the K-12 education system make more than double at \$70,114. Even retail workers make more money than child care staff, approximately \$7,438 more a year.⁵⁰ It is no surprise then, that providers have struggled to compete with other sectors to hire and retain staff.

While the number of Bucks County children attending high-quality programs has increased over time, unfortunately, 34% of children continue to attend STAR 1 or STAR 2 programs and may not be receiving the maximum benefit of high-quality early childhood education.⁵¹

The Share of Low-Income Children Under 5 in High-Quality Child Care Programs in Bucks County Increased 49% to 66% between 2017 and 2023 ⁵²

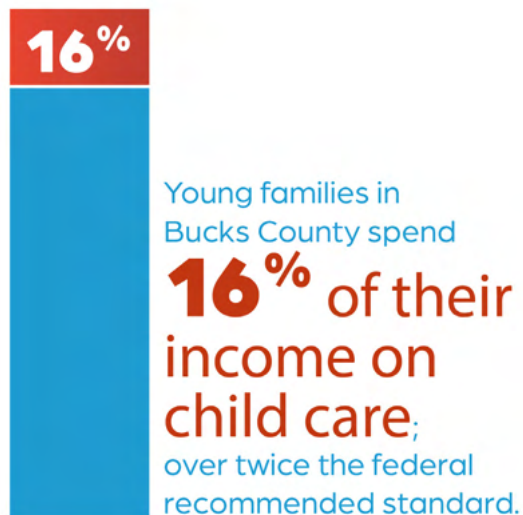


Quality Matters

While access to affordable child care continues to be a concern, it is also important that programs be high-quality. Research has shown that high-quality early childhood education 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.

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



K-12 Education

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

Almost All Children have Access to Full-Day Kindergarten

One way to improve early reading and math skills is to provide full-day kindergarten. Ten of the 13 Bucks County school districts offer full-day kindergarten to all families.⁵³ Council Rock will expand their program districtwide in 2025, and Central Bucks will expand to the full district in 2026.^{54,55} Only Pennridge remains without a full-day kindergarten plan.

The growth of full-day kindergarten is a big win for kids in the county. Ten years ago, only seven of the 13 school districts offered full-day kindergarten, and now almost every child in the county has access to the academic, early intervention, and social support offered by full-day kindergarten.⁵⁶

COVID Drop in Student Achievement Persists

When the pandemic forced schools to close in 2020, students across the county experienced major learning loss that is reflected in dropped test scores. The county's students are gaining back some lost ground, but students are still not back to where they were before the pandemic or where they were nine years ago.⁵⁷

EDUCATION FAST FACTS FOR BUCKS COUNTY

80,236 Bucks County students enrolled in traditional public schools across 13 school districts

1,686 students enrolled in 18 brick and mortar charter schools with tuition costs totaling \$28,871,343

1,257 students in 12 cyber charter schools with tuition costs totaling \$30,341,978

4.2% of students are English Language Learners

8% of high school students are enrolled in career and technical education (CTE)

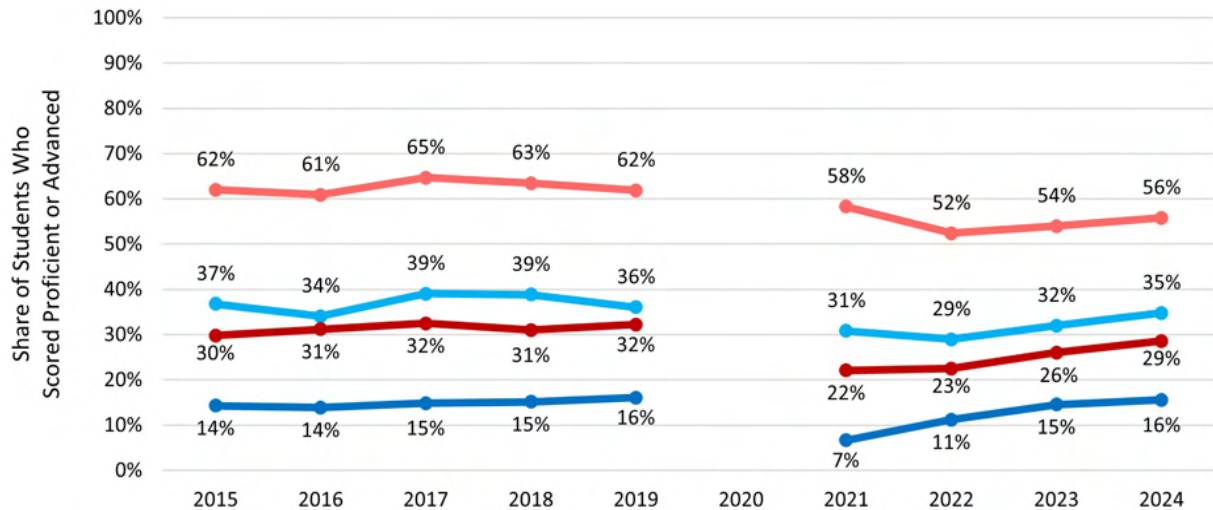
Five districts, teaching 38% of Bucks County have a remaining adequacy gap of \$32 million

Only 63% of third graders can pass English assessments

Only 34% of eighth graders can pass math assessments

Less than two thirds of Bucks County’s third graders can read on grade level and only one in three eighth graders are proficient in math – both major predictors of future success. Bucks County significantly outperforms the statewide average in third grade ELA and eight grade math.⁵⁸ However, within the county there are stark differences by school district.

Student Performance Suffered and is Still Recovering from COVID Learning Disruptions⁵⁹



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

Children who can read proficiently by fourth grade are more likely to be successful in school and career, and are more likely to grow into healthy adults and earn family-sustaining wages.^{60,61} In Bucks County, 37% of all third graders (2,098) cannot read proficiently – that’s enough to fill 29 school buses with three kids to a seat!^{62,63} The school districts in the county’s highest-poverty communities have the fewest students who can pass the reading test.⁶⁴

In the Lower Bucks school districts of Bristol Township, Bensalem Township, and Bristol Borough under 45% of third graders are reading on grade level. Just a few miles north in Palisades and Central Bucks, almost all third graders can pass the reading test.

In some school districts, funding constraints leave students without much-needed literacy support, like reading specialists, targeted tutoring, and small-group instruction. Another barrier to early literacy success is that some school districts are using an outdated “whole language” approach to teaching reading that has produced dismal reading outcomes for decades.⁶⁵

Fewer Third Graders in Bucks County Can Read Proficiently in High-Poverty School Districts ⁶⁶



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

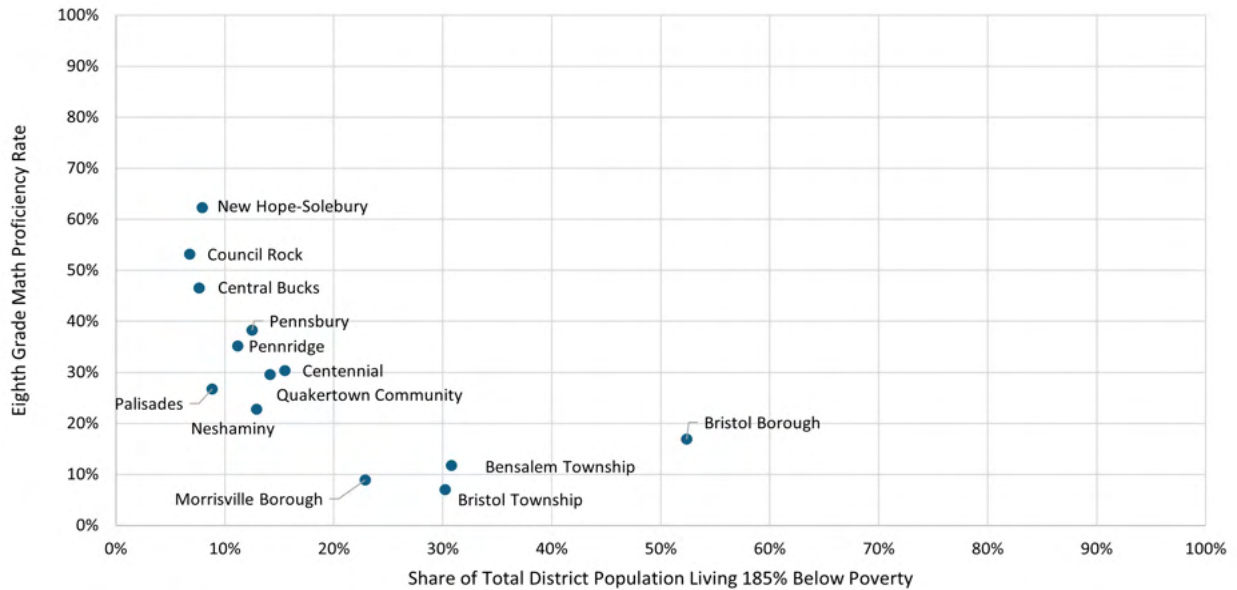
Eighth grade math proficiency is a predictor of students’ ability to take on more advanced coursework in high school and college and to apply math skills in their careers.⁶⁹

Eighth grade math proficiency is at a crisis point in low-wealth school districts. There are four school districts where less than 20% of eighth graders can pass the math proficiency test and they are the districts experiencing the most poverty.⁷⁰

While charter schools are not pictured on the chart above due to lack of poverty data availability, the county’s two brick and mortar charters have eighth grade math proficiency rates of 0% (Center for Student Learning at Pennsbury) and 20% (School Lane Charter School).⁷¹



Eighth Graders in Bucks County are at a Crisis Point in Math Proficiency in Low-Wealth School Districts ⁷²



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



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



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

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

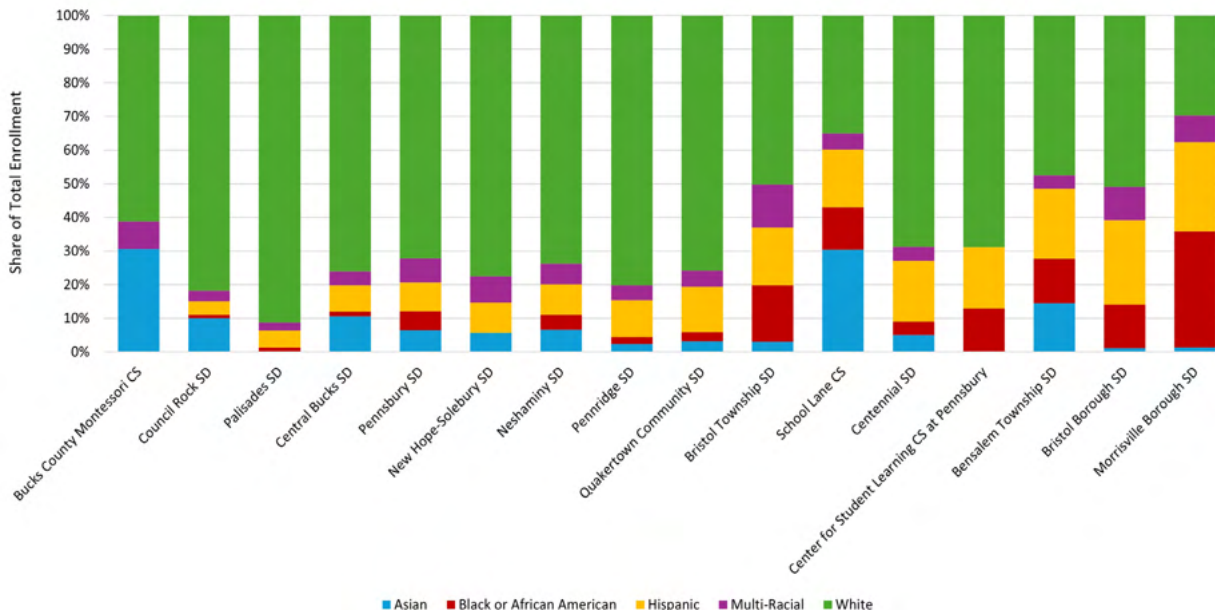
Students of color and low-income families are clustered in a handful of school districts and charter schools in Bucks County. These are the school districts with the lowest-value housing stock, which in turn generates the least revenue to fund their local schools.

For example, Bristol Township School District’s property tax rate of 22.5 mills generates \$13,476 per student.⁷⁴ Meanwhile, New Hope-Solebury School District’s tax rate of 13.3 mills produces \$32,647 per student because their housing values are so much higher than those in Bristol Township. New Hope-Solebury’s local taxes give the district more than twice as much per student at around half the local property tax rate. In this broken education funding system, low-wealth communities tax themselves at very high rates and still cannot raise the revenue they need for their local schools. Morrisville School District’s financial stress even caused them to seek a merger with neighboring district Pennsbury, though ultimately the merger did not happen.

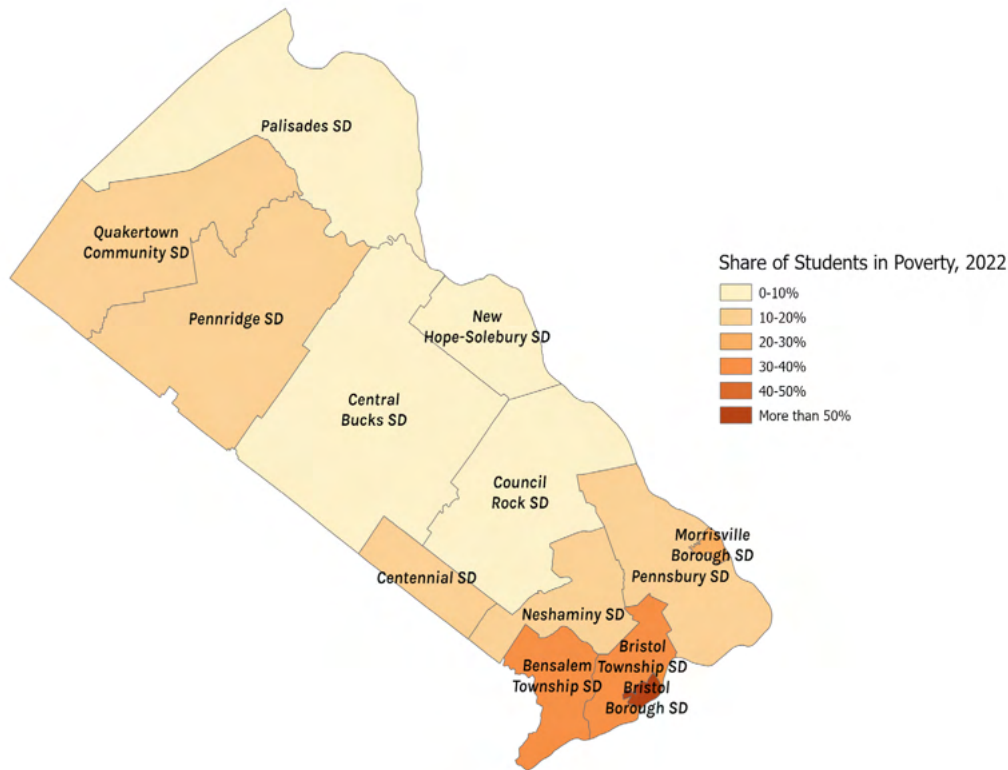
Underfunding is a Pennsylvania problem, not just a Bucks County problem. Pennsylvania gets an “A” grade for its overall level of funding but an “F” for the funding distribution, according to a recent Education Law Center report.⁷⁵ That’s because Pennsylvania’s school funding system relies heavily on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

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

Bucks County’s Black and Hispanic Students are Clustered in a Few School Districts and Charter Schools ⁷⁶



Students from Low-Wealth Families Concentrated in Four School Districts ⁷⁷



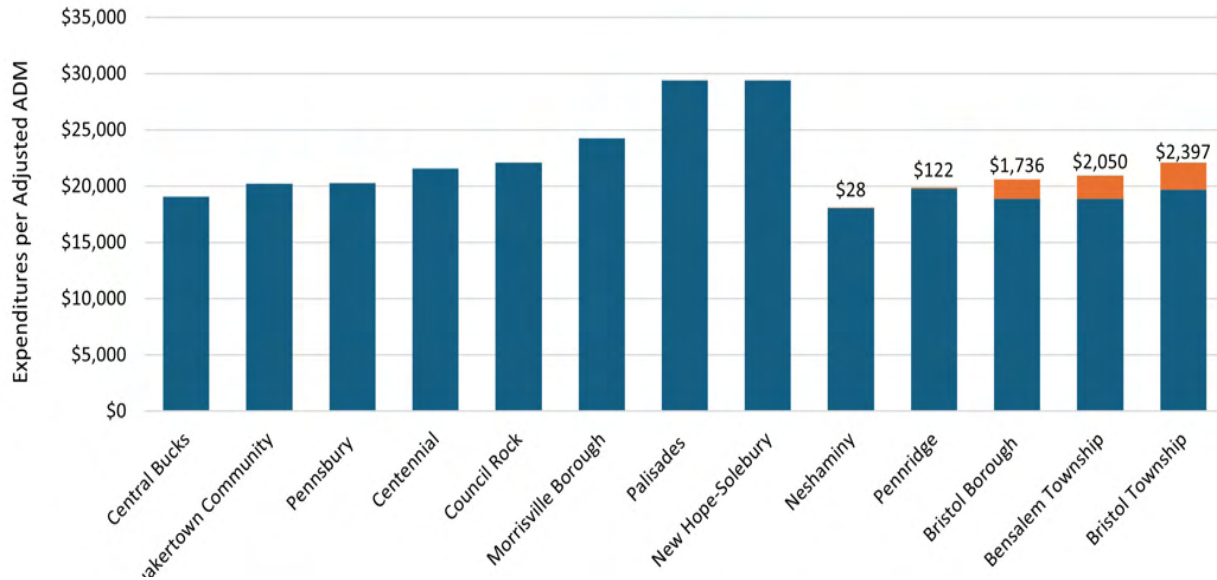
Approximately 13,051 public school students in Bucks County are living in poverty.⁷⁸ Overall, the number of students living in poverty has decreased over the last nine years, but the number and share of students in poverty has increased in two Bucks County school districts: Bensalem Township and Bristol Borough.⁷⁹ Five school districts, Bensalem Township, Bristol Township, Central Bucks, Neshaminy, and Pennsbury, each educate over 1,000 students whose families cannot make ends meet. In Bensalem Township, Bristol Borough, and Bristol Township, a quarter or more of the students live below the poverty line.⁸⁰ Numbers this large require a robust and dedicated plan to educate these students who are the county's future.

The State School Funding Adequacy Gap Persists

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

The state measured the total school funding shortfall at a whopping \$4.5 billion; Bucks County's total shortfall was measured at over \$36 million.⁸²

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



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

Five school districts in Bucks County qualify for adequacy funds, which will reach 32,682 students or 38% of students in the county.⁸⁴ The first \$4 million in adequacy funds was released in 2024 leaving a \$32 million adequacy gap to fill.⁸⁵ The other eight school districts also received funding increases to keep up with inflation and other rising costs. Charter schools also receive a share of the adequacy funding for each student who lives in the catchment of an adequacy-receiving school district.

A Shortage of High School Career Oriented Courses

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

As a result, little more than 7% of high school students across the state are enrolled as CTE concentrators. (A CTE concentrator is a student who successfully completes at least half of their CTE coursework.)

Student enrollment in CTE programs hails slightly better in Bucks County. About 8% of Bucks County high school students (2,354) are enrolled as CTE concentrators, a higher share than the overall state and the surrounding counties of southeastern Pennsylvania.⁸⁸ While at a ten year high, the number of students in these promising programs in Bucks County saw little change since 2016. The county's enrollment of CTE concentrators witnessed a slight decline from 2016 up through the pandemic before recovering by 2024.

Only **8% of high school students** in Bucks County are enrolled in Career/Technical Education programs.



Enrolled in Career/Technical Education

Promisingly, roughly two-fifths (40%) of Bucks County CTE concentrators come from families in poverty, demonstrating student demand for the programs and desire of parents to do what they can to help their children graduate high school and enter the middle class.^{89,90} Another ensuring indicator of CTE for students is the fact that Bucks County CTE concentrators are outperforming their peers across the state. About 38% of the county's CTE students pursued a post-secondary education, compared to a third of CTE students statewide.⁹¹

Still CTE enrollment rates are severely depressed due to resource limitations. State funds currently cover only 9% of CTE costs, requiring school districts to foot 88% of the costs (3% is covered by the federal Perkins V Grant).⁹²

As a result, programs that serve students in many low-wealth school districts cannot afford the materials and equipment needed to prepare students for their careers. Statewide programs also suffer from teacher shortages and large enrollment waitlists. Over 200 of the state's teacher vacancies are for CTE positions, and an estimated 27,000 students are on CTE waitlists.⁹³

Teachers are the Lynchpin to Learning

For math, English, and every other subject at school, the most important factor in student learning is their teacher. Students need qualified educators who can support their diverse needs.



The teacher’s level of instructional skill, years of experience, and culturally competent skillset matter but the major statewide teacher shortage has made it hard for the most underfunded school districts to recruit and retain qualified educators.⁹⁴

Bucks County has a relatively stable teacher workforce compared to other counties in the region, but there are still areas for growth. Across Bucks County in 2023, 22 teacher and school worker positions were unfilled and an additional 45 positions were being temporarily filled by substitutes.⁹⁵ Additionally, teachers’ experience levels vary across school districts and charter schools. Classroom teachers at most school districts and the Bucks County Montessori Charter School have over 10 years of experience on average, while teachers at School Lane Charter School and the Center for Student Learning Charter School averaged less than nine years.⁹⁶

To attract new teachers, school districts need to offer compelling starting salaries but there are wide gaps in pay ranging from \$47,000 in Neshaminy to \$57,000 in New Hope-Solebury.⁹⁷ Differences in teacher salaries make it much more attractive for teachers to choose wealthier school districts and exacerbate educational inequities.

Charter School Costs Rise Faster Than Other Costs

For over a decade, a major factor has been diverting funds away from the traditional public school system—charter school tuition.

Bucks County school districts are sending more than \$30 million to cyber charter schools where students perform much worse than students at traditional public schools.⁹⁸

Bucks County school districts send an additional \$29 million to brick and mortar charter schools.

Cyber charter school payments in Bucks County rose by

153%

in eight years,

reaching

\$30

million



Child Health

Bucks County benefits from strong community partnerships and economic stability, contributing to a high life expectancy of 79.3 years, above the state average.⁹⁹ However, these overall health indicators mask the challenges faced by vulnerable communities, including those living in poverty who experience limited access to healthcare, mental health services, and face barriers such as substance use, gender inclusivity, and protecting women’s health.

Recent developments, including the halted acquisition of three hospitals by WoodBridge Healthcare, highlight the need for sustainable, community-focused healthcare solutions.¹⁰⁰ Despite this setback, Bucks County’s commitment to behavioral health is evident in the Bright Path Center, a new crisis stabilization facility set to open in 2025.¹⁰¹ This center will consolidate mental health and substance use services under one roof, providing essential care for residents. However, demand for these services continues to exceed capacity, particularly for marginalized populations.

Vulnerable groups – those experiencing housing instability, food insecurity, and limited transportation – face even greater barriers to care. Environmental risks like lead exposure and gaps in Medicaid enrollment further exacerbate health disparities. Public awareness campaigns and targeted outreach are critical to improving enrollment and access to services.

Bucks County’s strong foundation offers a solid base for growth, but addressing healthcare access gaps and investing in mental health and health equity will require renewed commitment and action. By prioritizing inclusivity and restoring vital public health funding, the county can ensure better health outcomes for all residents.

CHILD HEALTH FAST FACTS FOR BUCKS COUNTY

In 2023, 46,708 children in Bucks County were on Medicaid and 3,559 were on CHIP

In 2024 7,617 children were affected by Medicaid unwinding, primarily due to procedural disenrollments

2,291 children in Bucks County are uninsured¹⁰²

82% of Bucks County children are still not screened for lead

15% of Bucks County students considered suicide; 4% reported attempting suicide

More than a third (36%) of Bucks County students report feeling sad or depressed most days

The teen pregnancy rate in Bucks County fell from 13 to 9 pregnancies per 1,000 females aged 15-19¹⁰³

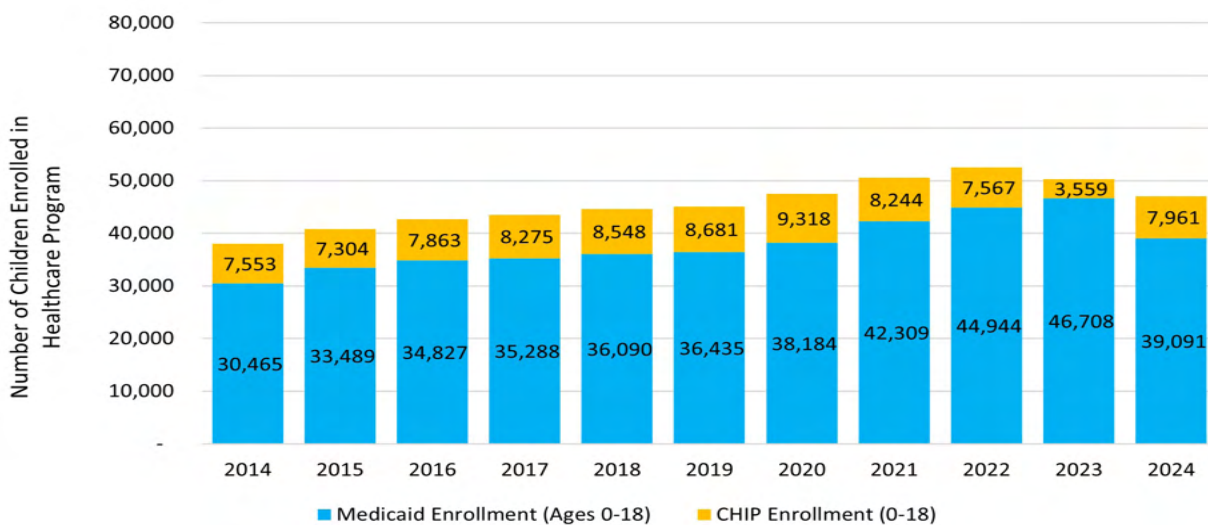
There is one licensed mental health provider for every 330 Bucks County residents¹⁰⁴

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

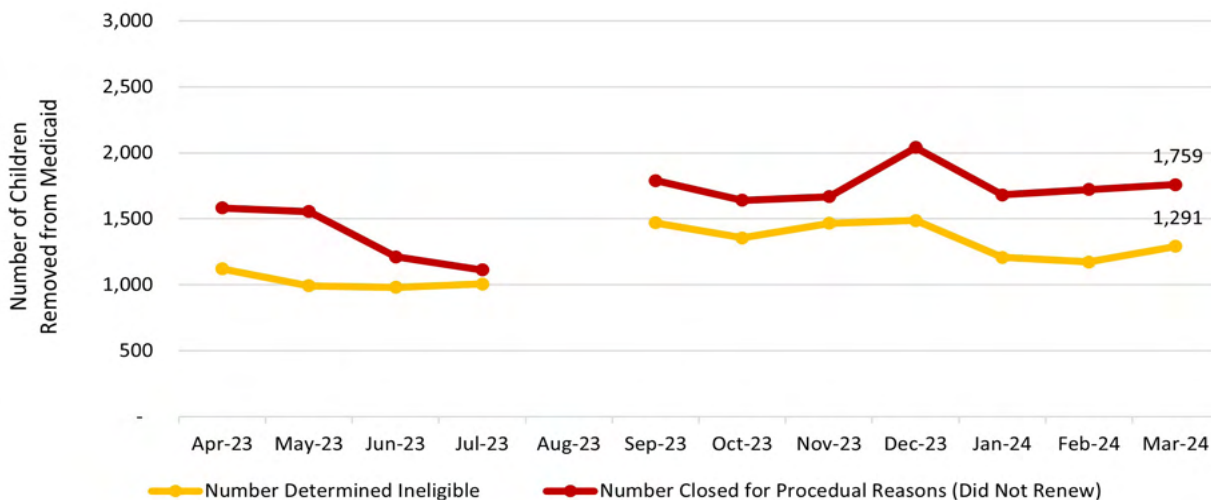
From 2014 to 2023, Medicaid enrollment for children in Bucks County steadily increased, peaking at 46,708 in 2023.¹⁰⁵ This upward trend reflects both a growing reliance on public health insurance and the effectiveness of Medicaid in filling healthcare access gaps for low-income families. However, following the reinstatement of annual renewal requirements in April 2023, Medicaid enrollment dropped sharply in 2024 to 39,091 – a loss of 7,617 children. This is primarily due to post-pandemic procedural disenrollments associated with changes 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 Insurance¹⁰⁶



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.

The Number of Children Disenrolled from Medicaid is Rising ¹⁰⁷



Since Medicaid renewal requirements resumed, families in Bucks County have faced significant challenges in maintaining this coverage. Between April 2023 and March 2024, about 1,500 Bucks County children lost their Medicaid coverage every month not because of ineligibility, but because of procedural barriers stemming from the unwinding.¹⁰⁸

Medicaid enrollment dropped sharply in 2024 to 39,091 - a loss of coverage for 7,617 children.

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, Bucks County counted 7,966 children enrolled on Medicaid based on a diagnosed disability, including physical, intellectual, developmental, or psychiatric disability. This is an increase of 1,009 children since 2022 despite the high percentage of disenrollment.^{109,110}

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

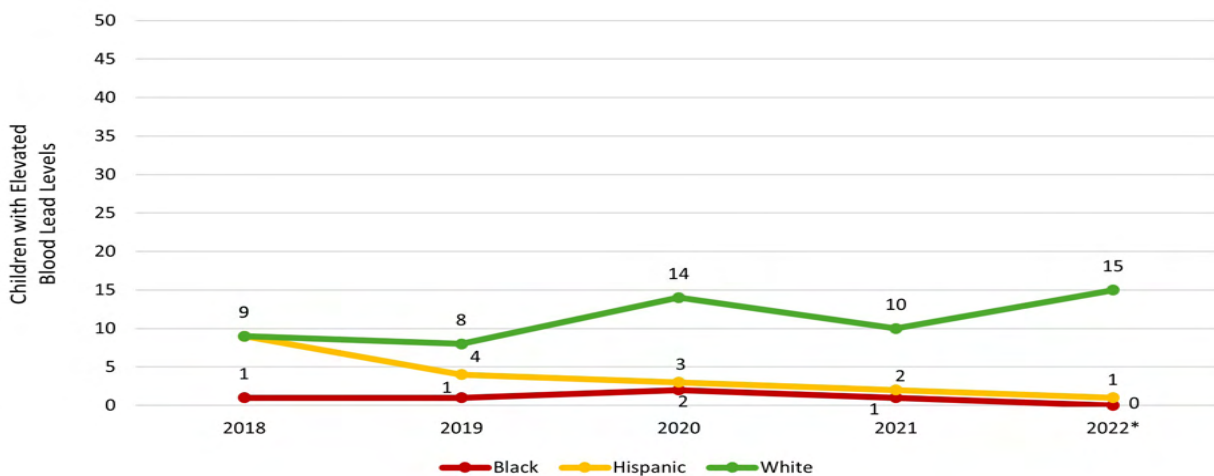
Beyond healthcare access, environmental health justice remains an issue in Bucks County, where systemic inequities expose marginalized communities to greater environmental hazards. Older housing, poor indoor air quality, and exposure to environmental stressors like air pollution contribute to rising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

Lead Toxins Continue to Cause Permanent Harm

Lead education and prevention measures by county agencies are critical. Lead exposure is a significant health risk for children in Bucks County, particularly in areas where 60% of the homes were built before lead-based paint was banned in 1978.¹¹¹ Lead poisoning is linked to irreversible cognitive and behavioral damage, contributing to poorer academic performance and long-term economic disadvantages for affected children.¹¹² Additionally, the financial burden on healthcare and education systems is significant, as children with elevated blood lead levels (EBLL) often require specialized medical care and support services.

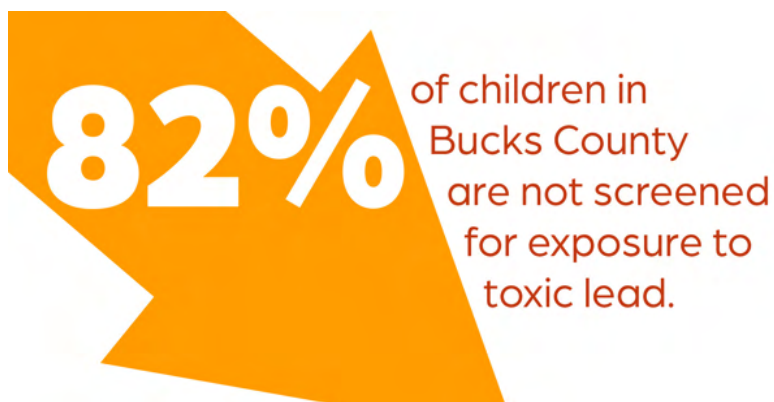
This exposure poses severe risks to cognitive, behavioral, and physical development, especially for children in low-income families who may lack the resources to move to safer housing, afford private abatement services, or to negotiate abatement services from their landlord.

White Children Face a Higher Risk of Lead Exposure ¹¹³



Data from 2022 shows that only 18% of Bucks County children under age two were tested for lead poisoning.¹¹⁴

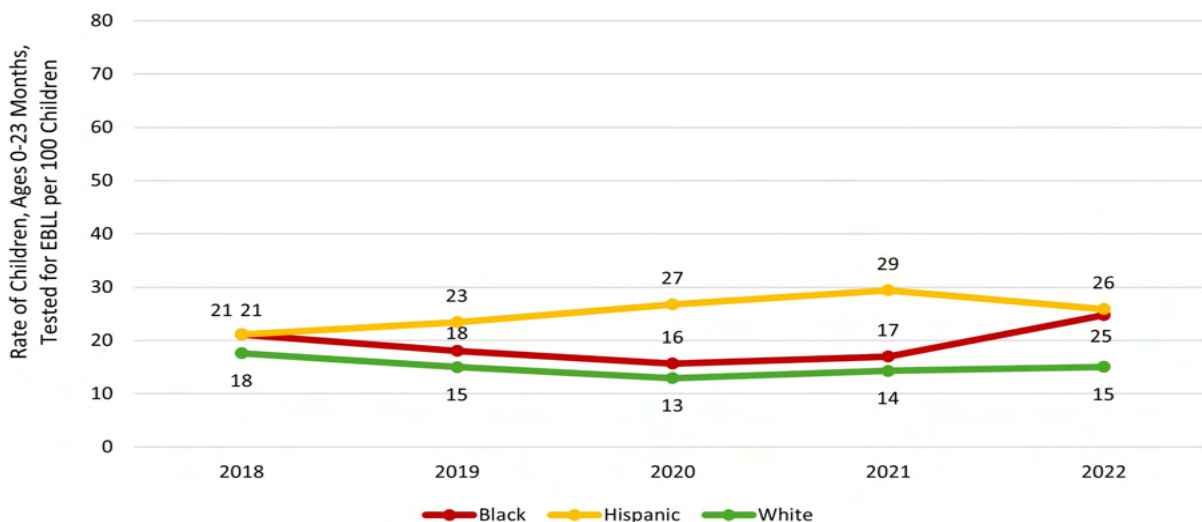
Hispanic children had the highest lead testing rates (26%), followed by Black children (25%) and white children (15%). The higher testing rates are linked to higher rates of testing among Hispanic and Black children are linked to higher rates of Medicaid coverage within these communities. Medicaid requires lead testing at least twice before the age of two.



Despite improved testing rates compared to previous years, about 82% of Bucks County children were still not screened for lead, leaving a significant portion of the population vulnerable to undetected exposure.¹¹⁵

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

Less than 20% of Children are Tested for Lead Exposure ¹¹⁷

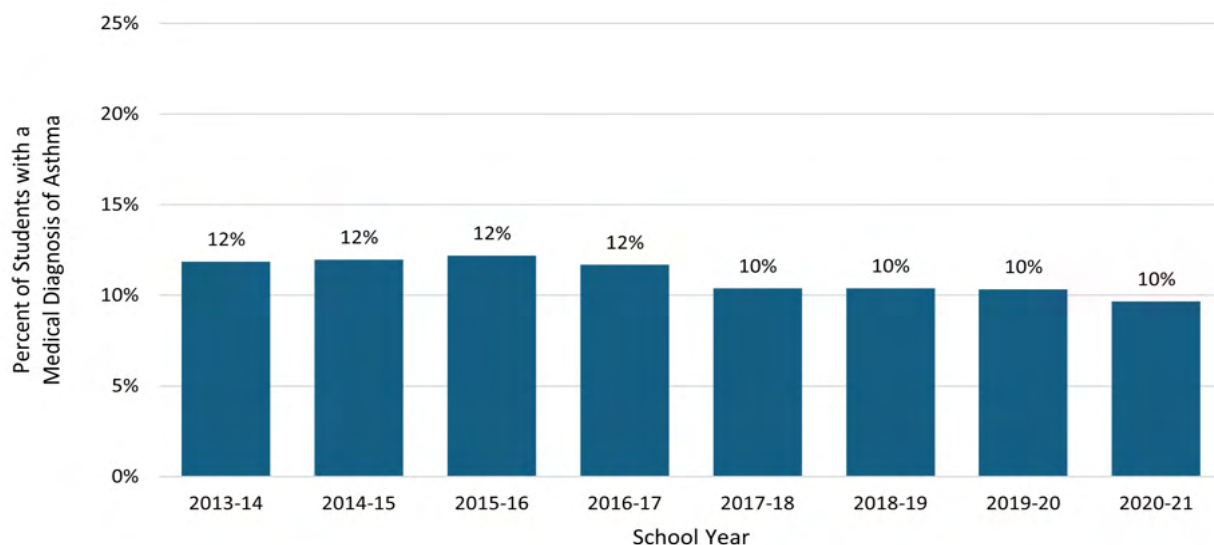


In 2022, the CDC lowered the blood lead reference level from 5 µg/dL to 3.5 µg/dL, reflecting growing evidence that no level of lead exposure is safe for children.¹¹⁸ This adjustment enhances early detection of lead exposure’s harmful effects but may create the perception of rising EBLL rates when, in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

Childhood Asthma Persists

Childhood asthma remains a key environmental health concern in Bucks County. While the county has seen progress in reducing asthma rates – from 12% in 2013 to 10% in 2021 – Black and low-income families continue to bear a disproportionate burden.¹¹⁹ Poor housing conditions, including mold, pests, and inadequate ventilation, are significant contributors to asthma symptoms. These environmental triggers exacerbate respiratory health disparities, leaving affected children at higher risk of missed school days, hospital visits, and chronic complications.

Share of Students with Asthma Remained Relatively Unchanged ¹²⁰



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

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

Environmental health disparities in Bucks County also extend to maternal and infant health, as evidenced by rising preterm birth rates. Since 2016, overall preterm births across all races appear to have plateaued, increasing slightly from 8.6% to 8.8% in 2023. However, when disaggregated by race, stark disparities emerge. Black mothers experience the highest rates of preterm births at 10.4%, followed by 9.4% for Hispanic mothers, Asian mothers at 9.1%, and White mothers at 8.5%.¹²¹ These disparities highlight the disproportionate burden on Black mothers, who consistently face the highest rates in Bucks 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 10%.
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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 people, especially in underserved communities.¹²² While these efforts are a step forward, more work needs to be done.

Vaccination Compliance Rates Worsened

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

Rising vaccine exemption rates put children's lives at risk and increase the likelihood of disease transmission in schools and communities. Nationwide, routine vaccination rates for kindergartners declined during the pandemic, dropping during the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years after a decade of stability.¹²³ Coverage failed to return to pre-pandemic levels in 2022-23, compounded by vaccine misinformation, hesitancy, and more exemptions.¹²⁴ From 2015 to 2024, the exemption rate of Bucks County kindergartners nearly doubled, from 2.4% to 4.1%.^{125,126}

The share of children in Bucks County starting school without required vaccinations nearly **doubled** since 2016.



While this rate may seem small, it jeopardizes herd immunity which requires high coverage for many diseases. For example, there must be a minimum 95% measles vaccination rate to prevent an outbreak.¹²⁷

These shifts have real-world consequences. Bucks County is facing a troubling rise in pertussis cases, with a rate of 3.0 per 100,000 residents— double Pennsylvania’s statewide rate of 1.5. Pennsylvania has experienced a staggering tenfold increase to over 2,000 cases—that’s 10 times the number seen at this point last year and the highest in the nation.^{128,129} While historically high vaccination rates have prevented large-scale outbreaks of diseases like measles and meningitis, the resurgence of pertussis underscores the urgent need to reverse these trends across all age groups to protect the most susceptible individuals.

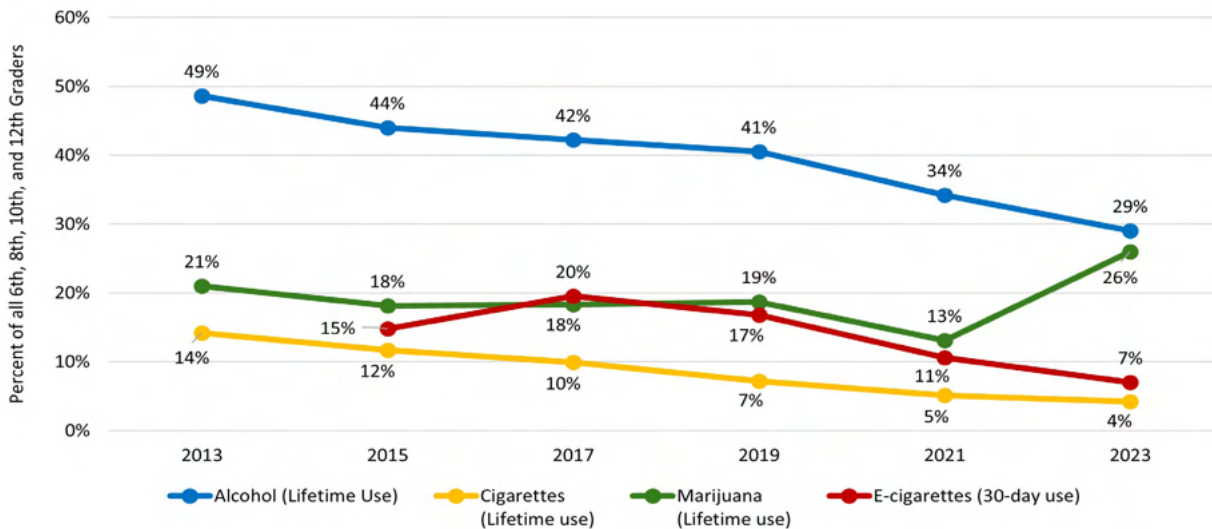
Young People Still Struggle with their Mental Health

One in five children experience a mental, emotional, or behavioral health disorder.¹³⁰ Alarmingly, in Bucks County this translates to at least 24,953 children, and fewer than half of them will receive the treatment they need because of barriers to care. This crisis is exacerbated by the shortage of mental health providers, a systemic issue seen nationwide. Families in Bucks County frequently report significant challenges in accessing timely and appropriate care for their children, highlighting a critical gap in the local system. There is only one licensed mental health provider for every 330 Bucks County residents.¹³¹

Teen Drinking, Drugs, and Smoking All Decline

Risk behaviors are important measures when considering youth mental health because research consistently has shown a strong association between engaging in risk behaviors and negative mental health outcomes.

Risky Youth Behaviors Show Precipitous Drop ¹³²



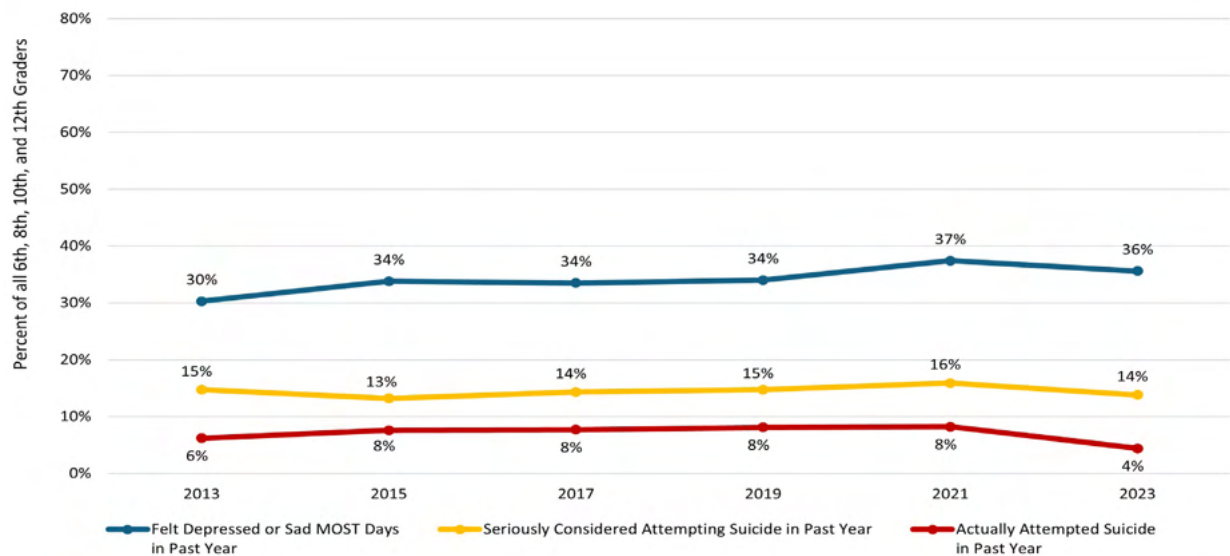
The CDC defines risk behaviors as actions that increase the likelihood of injury, disease, or other negative health outcomes. Risk behaviors include lifetime use of substances including alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, and e-cigarettes (vaping).

Across three of four risk behaviors, substance use has plummeted in the last decade. The percentage of Bucks County students grades six to 12 who report lifetime use of alcohol has dropped from 49% of students in 2013 to only 29% in 2023.¹³³ Cigarette use declined from 14% to 4% over the same period. For vaping, use over the past 30 days decreased from 15% to 7% since 2015. Marijuana use occasionally dipped in between the years but overall increased from 21% to 26%.¹³⁴ According to Bucks County health officials, the decrease in these risk behaviors does not appear to be attributable to any specific public health campaign or intervention.

Teen Depression, Anxiety, and Suicide - Red Flag Trends

The Pennsylvania Youth Survey (PAYS) has shown the consistently high prevalence of mental health symptoms over the past decade.¹³⁵ Bucks County's data mirrors statewide and national trends with fewer children engaging in risk behaviors, yet 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.

Stubbornly High Indicators of Mental Distress Went Unabated ¹³⁶



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 sixth to twelfth graders in Bucks County, the percentage of youth who reported feeling sad or depressed most days in the past year remained relatively stable, starting at 30% in 2013 and ending at 36% in 2023, rising to 37% in 2021 in relation to COVID school closures.¹³⁷

In Bucks County, students who considered suicide and attempted suicide peaked in 2021, although the trendline shows less dramatic change - 15% of Bucks County students considered suicide in 2013, compared with 14% in 2023.¹³⁸ This is in alignment with the data on depression and sadness, showing that levels of suicidal ideation have remained relatively consistent over the last decade. While the percentage of students who attempted suicide dropped from 6% in 2013 to 4% in 2023, the overall trendline shows only a slight decrease over time. It is possible that the 2023 data is an outlier and should be monitored closely in the coming years.

This contradiction – improved behavior paired with declining well-being – points to the profound impact of technology and social media. The U.S. Surgeon General issued a health advisory that “social media can have profound risk of harm to the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents.”¹³⁹ 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.¹⁴⁰

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.

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

Tracking youth mental health outcomes requires more robust data at the county level. Since its launch in July 2022, the national 988 Lifeline, a 24/7 crisis resource, has answered 5,308 calls from Bucks County residents.¹⁴¹

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



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



Child Welfare & Juvenile Justice

Ten Year Indicators for Child Abuse and Neglect Fluctuate

Children have the best chance at a bright future when they can grow up with their needs met in their own homes, families, and communities – without the trauma of abuse or neglect or separation from their parents. Decades of research illustrates that family adversity, including poverty, is linked to a higher occurrence of abuse and neglect.¹⁴² Abuse, neglect, and placement in foster care are all associated with a greater likelihood of mental health challenges, substance use, and poor educational outcomes.^{143,144,145}

Over the past decade, the number of substantiated child abuse and neglect reports has fluctuated. After years of lower numbers, substantiated cases reached a high of 116 in 2018, then began to decline in subsequent years, falling to 87 substantiated reports in 2022.¹⁴⁶

If a report does not rise to the level of abuse or neglect but alleges that a family needs services, it is assigned as General Protective Services (GPS). The number of valid GPS reports more than doubled, from 958 in 2015 to a high of 2,301 in 2021. In 2022, there was a slight decline to 2,084 valid GPS reports.¹⁴⁷

CHILD WELFARE FAST FACTS FOR BUCKS COUNTY

87 substantiated reports of child abuse and neglect

6,917 children receiving in-home services

119 children entering foster care

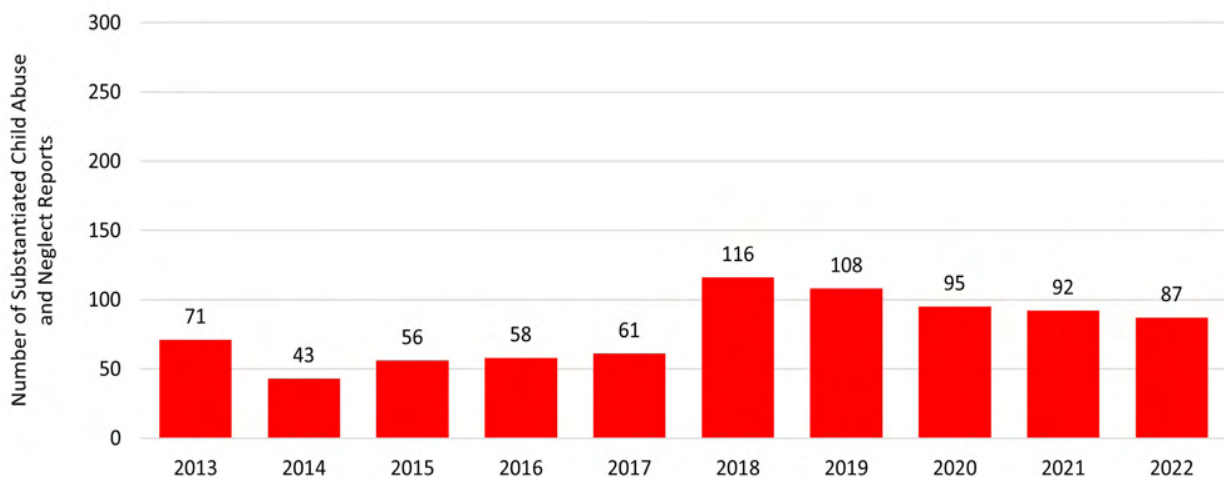
JUVENILE JUSTICE FAST FACTS FOR BUCKS COUNTY

420 youth arrests

415 secure detention admissions

72 long-term facility placements

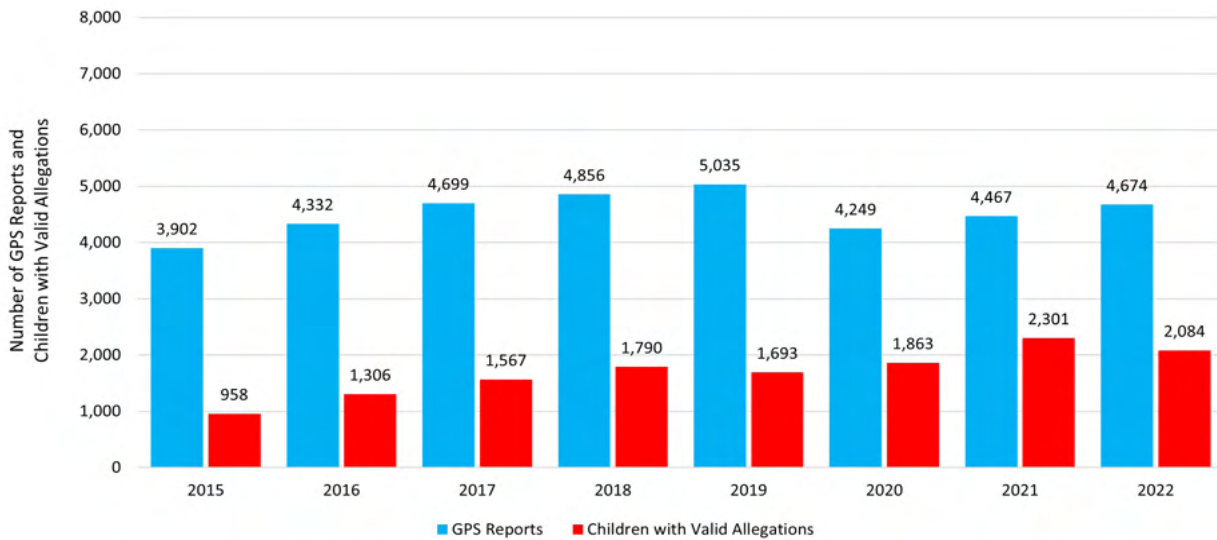
Substantiated Cases of Abuse or Neglect Reach Five Year Low ¹⁴⁸



The increase in valid GPS reports following the COVID pandemic can be attributed to several factors, including but not limited to families’ return to regular contact with schools, medical offices and other reporting sources, along with the economic and social toll of the pandemic on family stability and well-being.

Instead of removing children from the home when there are no immediate safety threats, Bucks County Children and Youth Social Services refers families to community supports, like mental health or housing services, and continues to work with them.

An Increasing Number of Families Need Services to Reduce the Risk of Abuse and Neglect ¹⁴⁹



In 2022, 6,917 Bucks County children and their families received in-home services to address needs related to safety, risk of harm, and overall child and family well-being.¹⁵⁰ This represents a decrease from 2014, when 7,154 children received services in their homes. This reflects the county’s shift toward serving families whose needs can be met outside the formal child welfare system. Through community pathways, Bucks County families can access child welfare prevention services without having to have an open child welfare case.¹⁵¹

Fewer Children are Removed from their Families

A total of 349 Bucks County children were in foster care in 2022, a 41% decrease from 589 children in foster care in 2014.¹⁵² Primary reasons for placement in out-of-home care in Bucks County include parental substance use and mental health challenges, parental inability or failure to meet children’s needs, child behavior, and physical abuse.

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3% more children and their families are receiving in-home services associated with abuse or neglect from 2014 to 2022.

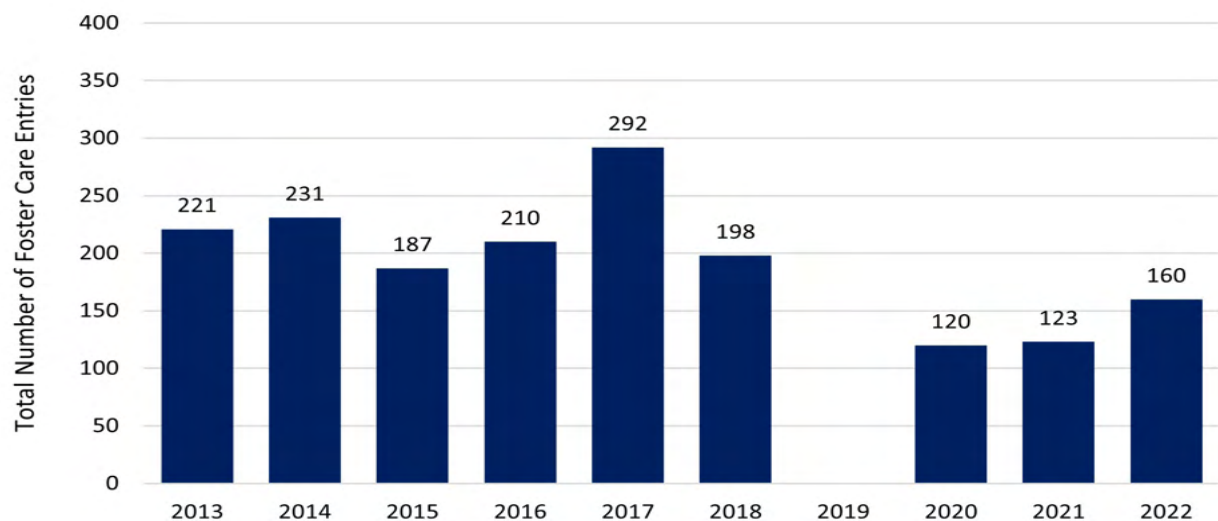
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The number of Bucks County children entering into out-of-home placement has declined over the past decade, from 181 in 2013 to 119 in 2022.¹⁵³

The county child welfare agency has made efforts to prevent children from entering foster care through partnerships with community agencies to address family needs like mental health and housing. As part of a collaboration with community mental health provider K/S, provider staff and Children and Youth caseworkers visit the home together to connect families with services and prevent unnecessary foster care placements for youth with behavioral health needs.¹⁵⁴

Another local partnership with the Bucks County Opportunity Council, called Pathways to Housing, provides short-term communal housing for families at risk of foster care placement or for whom lack of housing poses a barrier to reunification. While families are in this temporary housing, the program also helps them secure a long-term, stable place to live.¹⁵⁵

County Measures to Support Children Keep Foster Care Cases Low ¹⁵⁶



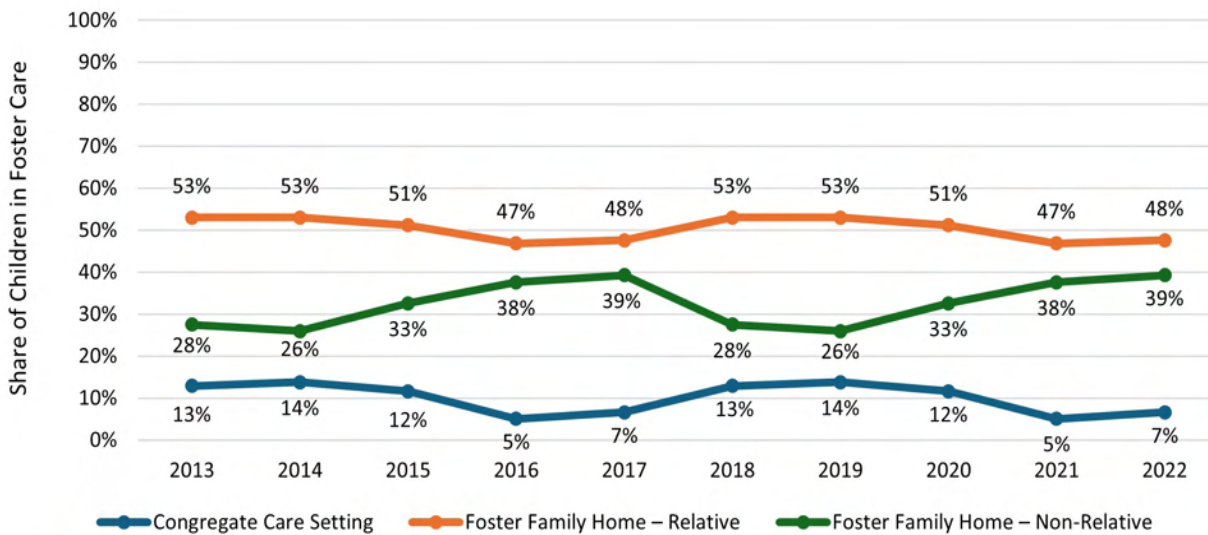
The overall decrease in foster care placements aligns with the national trend to focus on foster care prevention, most notably indicated by the enactment of the federal Family First Prevention Services Act in 2019, which provides federal reimbursement to states and jurisdictions for prevention services.

When children cannot be safe at home, the priority is to place them with a relative before sending them to a licensed foster home. Almost half of children in foster care in Bucks County are in relative placements, while 39% are placed with non-relatives.¹⁵⁷

Hidden Foster Care

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

Bucks County Keeps 93% of Foster Children Out of Congregate Care. Most Children Needing Foster Care Placements are with Relatives¹⁵⁸

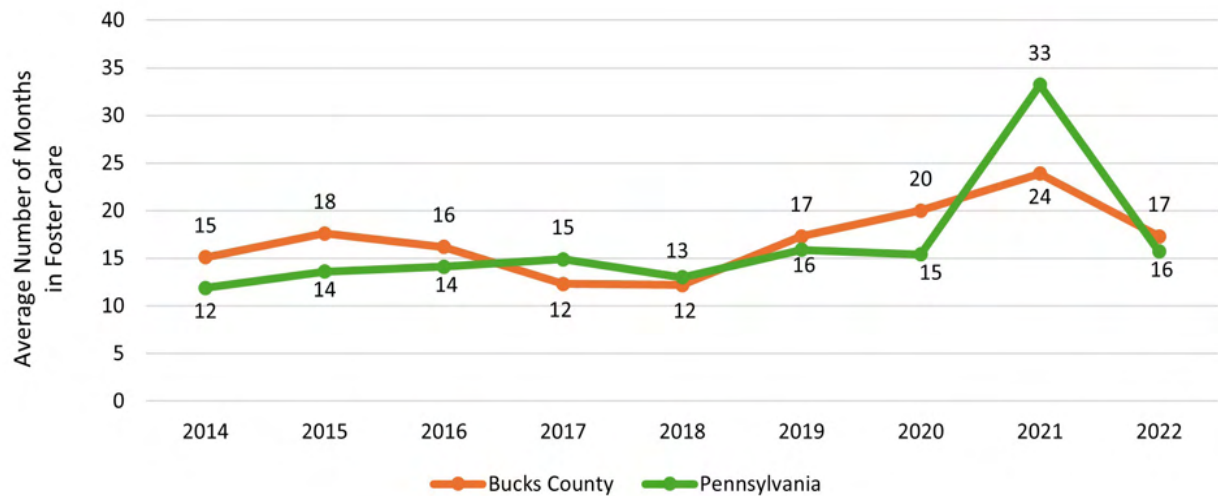


Foster care is meant to be a temporary arrangement for children while their families work to address safety and risk factors in the home. Long stays in foster care are associated with placement instability, and those young people who “age out” are more likely to have long-term education, housing, employment, and mental health challenges than those with stable long-term caregivers.^{159,160}

Though the average length of stay spiked in 2021 (likely due to court delays and extended foster care provisions during the pandemic), children in Bucks County are more recently remaining in out-of-home care for an average of 17.3 months, slightly longer than the statewide average.¹⁶¹

In recent years, the number of children leaving foster care to a “forever home” (reunification, adoption or guardianship) has decreased slightly, from 86% in 2021 to 82.5% in 2022.¹⁶²

On Average, Bucks County Children Spend a Year and a Half in Foster Care ¹⁶³



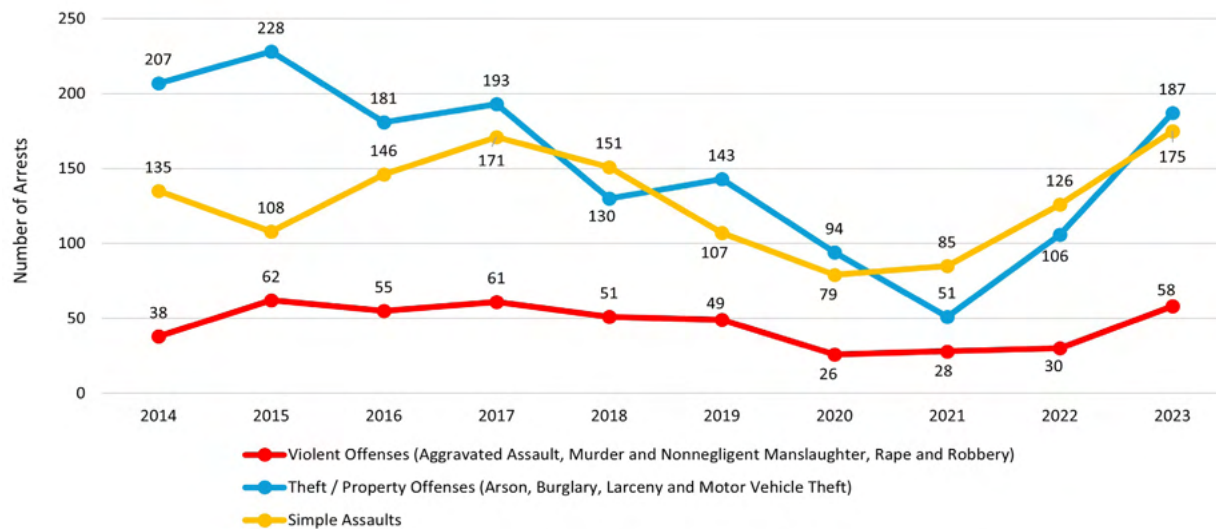
The number of children leaving foster care to non-permanent placements (e.g., aging out of foster care into adulthood vs. being reunified with family or adopted) have increased, from 8.1% in 2021 to 12.7% in 2022.

These changes may be associated with the low 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 staffing constraints reported across the sector, 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.¹⁶⁴ Young people who do break the law fare better when they have the opportunity to repair the harm they've caused outside of the court system.¹⁶⁵ Being locked up is associated with worse educational outcomes, worse mental health, and lower earning potential as adults. Youth who are incarcerated are up to 80% more likely to be rearrested within three years of release, and they're more likely to be locked up or placed on probation as adults.¹⁶⁶ 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.

Youth Crime in Bucks County has Fluctuated for Most of the Past Decade, but Recently is on the Rise Again¹⁶⁷



Youth crime, arrests, and incarceration, both in Bucks County and across Pennsylvania, have declined over the past decade. Following the COVID pandemic, there has been an increase in youth arrests, with arrests for property crimes – the most common offense – increasing 76% from 2022 to 2023.¹⁶⁸ Though the numbers remained low overall, violent offenses doubled between 2022 and 2023 from 30 to 58, respectively. Simple assaults (e.g., school fights) increased 38% during the same period.

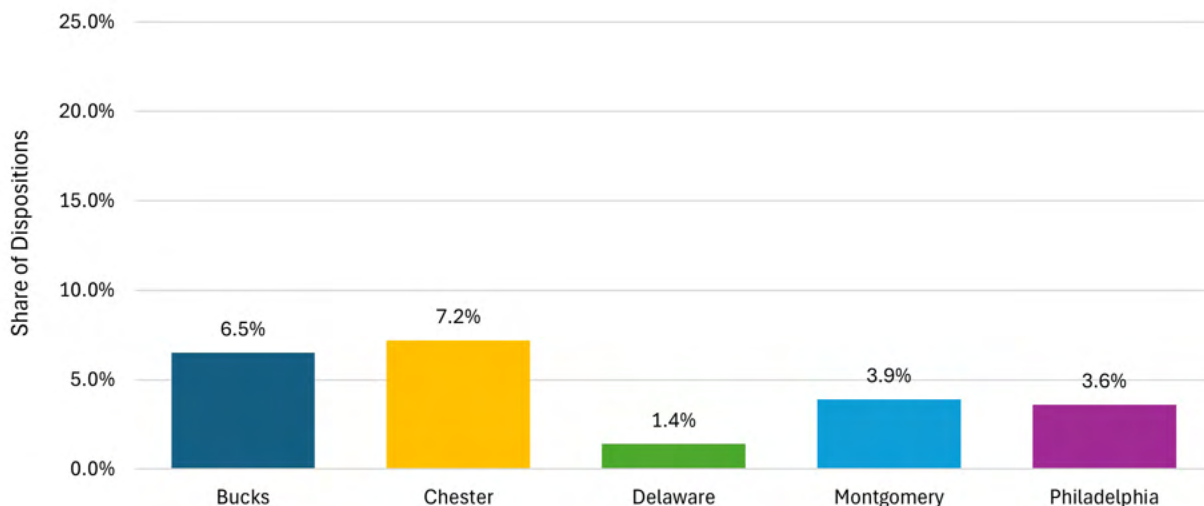
While income data is currently unavailable for youth in the juvenile justice system, the number of thefts and other property offenses further underscores the economic hardships faced by young people and their families, as well as a lack of available community-based activities.

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 had 415 admissions of Bucks County youth to secure detention facilities (detention is intended to be short-term and is utilized when the court determines a young person cannot remain home while awaiting juvenile court processes), the second highest of the southeastern counties.¹⁶⁹

In addition to high numbers of youth held in detention, 6.5% of initial delinquency court decisions sent Bucks County youth to long-term secure facilities. In 2023, Bucks County delinquency courts ordered 72 juvenile justice facility placements.¹⁷⁰ Most other juvenile court decisions resulted in less restrictive interventions, like probation and/or community services.

Bucks County has the Second Highest Share of Long-Term Juvenile Justice Placements in the Region ¹⁷¹



In 2023, the county diverted 61% of new delinquency charges, which means those youth were given the option to avoid a conviction going on their juvenile record.¹⁷² The Bucks County Youth Aid Panel, which began in the 1970s, is the county's diversion program administered by the Juvenile Probation office. Through the Youth Aid Panel, trained volunteers work with young people and their families to determine the most appropriate response (for example, a letter of apology or drug and alcohol treatment) to an offense.¹⁷³

Despite this progress, racial disproportionality is egregious in the juvenile justice system in Bucks County and across Pennsylvania. In Bucks County, Black youth are overrepresented in delinquency dispositions (27%) and detention admissions (26%), despite comprising just 10% of the county youth population.¹⁷⁴

Local and County Recommendations: Bucks County

In Early Childhood Education, Bucks County must:

- Utilize county-level funds, in partnership with philanthropic organizations, to recruit and retain the early childhood workforce. Examples include Montgomery County, where \$4 million was allocated out of the Montgomery County Recovery Plan for the Childcare Operation Recovery Grant Program, which provides operational grants to licensed child care programs, and York County where the ECHO Innovation Award grants \$25,000 to \$50,000 to early childhood education programs to pilot innovative projects that expand the number of children and families served or increase the quality of care and education provided.
- Partner with philanthropic organizations to create a facilities fund for providers to increase the supply of high-quality early childhood programs. Like Philadelphia's Fund for Quality or the Harris County (Texas) SHINE Child Care Facilities Fund, these funds can provide financial assistance to providers for capital improvements that advance program quality.
- Provide forgivable start-up loans to providers opening child care programs, like the BLOOM Business Empowerment Center, a program of the York County Economic Alliance that provides forgivable loans ranging from \$10,000 to \$40,000 to early childhood education start-up businesses.

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

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

Local and County Recommendations: Bucks County

For Improved Child Health Outcomes, Bucks County must:

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

To Improve Child Welfare, Bucks County must:

- Continue, and expand where needed, the use of concrete and economic supports to prevent child welfare system involvement and placement in foster care. A growing body of evidence suggests that economic and concrete supports (e.g., food, transportation assistance) are key to the prevention of maltreatment and child welfare involvement.¹⁷⁵
- Increase focus on children and families lingering in the system and implement the array of services that would best promote their permanency, stability, and well-being.
- Explore the extent to which informal relative caregiving arrangements exist and ensure these caregivers have adequate resources to provide for children in their care.

To Improve the Juvenile Justice System, Bucks County must:

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

For Improved Economic Mobility, Bucks County must:

- Invest in high school and community college career related 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.¹⁷⁶
- Fully reimburse early childhood providers who receive child care subsidies for low-income children for the total cost of care. The current rate child care providers are paid is based on what families can afford, not what it costs to operate. This reform would allow providers to receive more reliable payments, budget effectively for staffing costs, and increase openings for more children.
- Create a refundable child tax credit. California, Colorado, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, and Vermont all provide refundable tax credits which address one of the primary drivers of child-well-being: family economic well-being.

State Recommendations

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

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

State Recommendations

For Improved Child Health Outcomes, State Lawmakers must:

- Maximize Medicaid funding to substantially improve children’s mental health in Pennsylvania by:
 - Expanding the scope of reimbursable services to include prevention, early intervention, and less intensive services known as Tier One and Tier Two supports.
 - Broadening the types of providers certified and eligible to deliver services at each tier of intervention to increase access to diverse and culturally competent professionals.
 - Ensuring that the definition of medical necessity is fully applied to authorize mental health services and payments for all eligible children.
 - Integrating mental health services for parents and young children in pediatric primary care settings.
 - Centering schools as critical partners in mental health care systems and payor networks.
- Invest in children’s health by expanding health insurance coverage to 2,291 uninsured children in Bucks County.
- Protect Pennsylvania children by ending lead poisoning through guaranteeing all children get tested twice before the age of two for lead; and pass local ordinances that require all dwellings to undergo lead safety inspections.



State Recommendations

To Improve Child Welfare, State Lawmakers must:

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

To Improve the Juvenile Justice System, State Lawmakers must:

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

For Improved Economic Mobility, State Lawmakers must:

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



Endnotes

Endnotes for this report can be found at:
www.childrenfirstpa.org/buckscoendnotes2025

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

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

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

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

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