



A DECADE OF STALLED PROGRESS

*OPPORTUNITY STUNTED
FOR CHILDREN IN MONTGOMERY COUNTY*



*A Children First
Report on Montgomery County
February 2025*

children
FIRST
THE ADVOCATE FOR KIDS

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Introduction

Montgomery County is home to approximately 183,000 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 35,300 children in Montgomery 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.

ECONOMIC FAST FACTS FOR MONTGOMERY COUNTY

35,300 children live in families earning too little to meet their needs

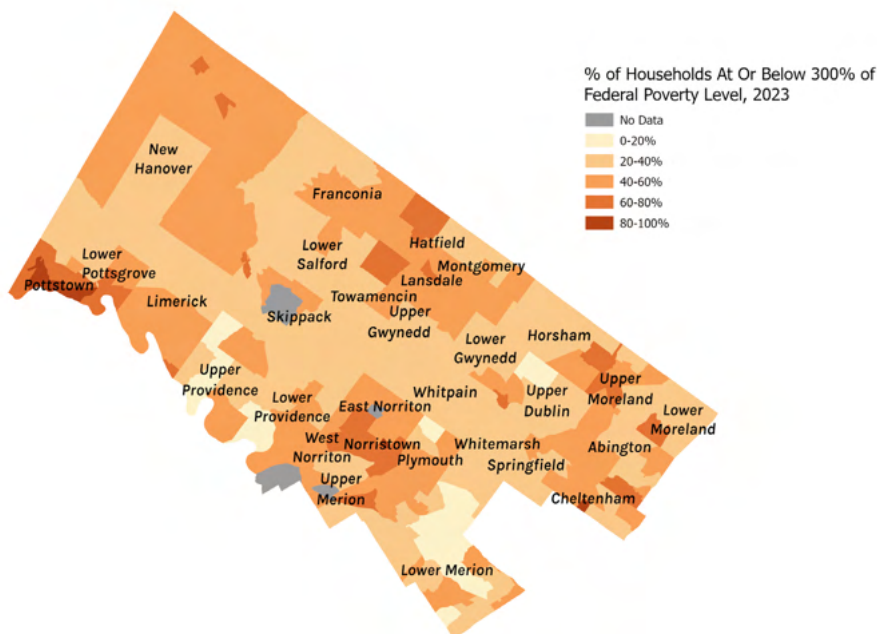
33% of all families with children are earning less than needed

Families with two children need to earn \$88,104 or much more if they have child care costs

10% of families report being food insecure

Families earning the least lost \$1,609 of purchasing power in the last decade

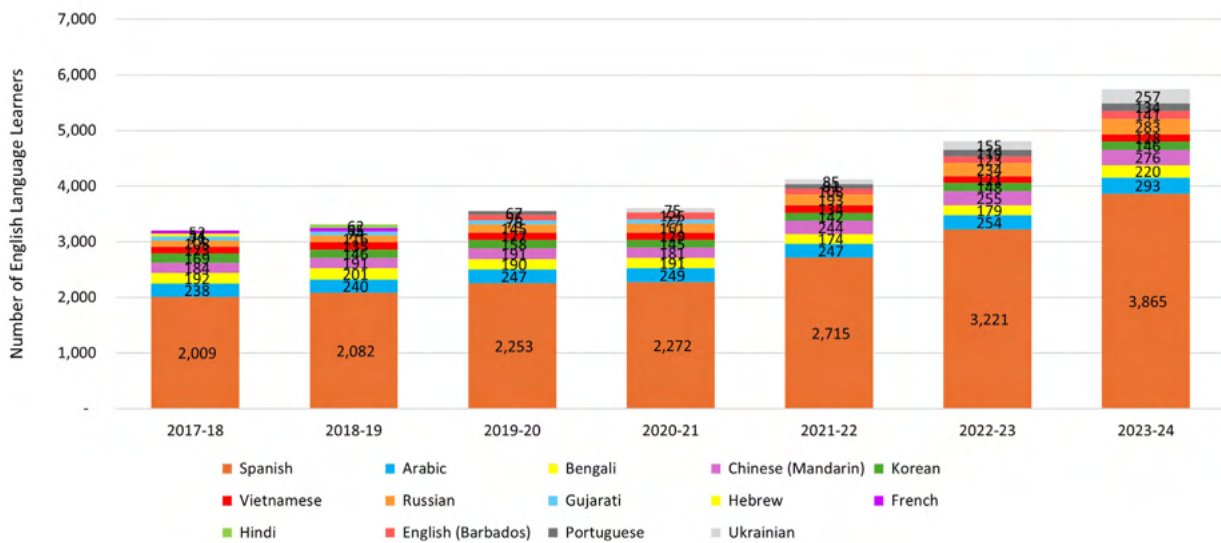
20% or More of Families are Struggling to Make Ends Meet in Nearly Every Community Across Montgomery County⁴



Montgomery County’s children are more diverse today than they were ten years ago as the share of Asian children edged up by one percentage point and the share of Hispanic children increased by three percentage points in the decade, boosting the numbers of children of color by about 10,731 compared to 2014.⁵ About 35% of children are non-white compared to roughly 30% a decade ago.

While many cultural and ethnic communities are increasingly calling Montgomery County home, Hispanic children account for the fastest growing newcomers.

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



There were 3,865 children whose first language is Spanish enrolled in public schools in the 2024 school year, compared to about 2,000 in 2018.⁷ Often large demographic categories obscure the diverse cultural heritages included in them. For example, Hispanic children come from a variety of heritages depending on their parents’ country of origin and ethnicity. 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

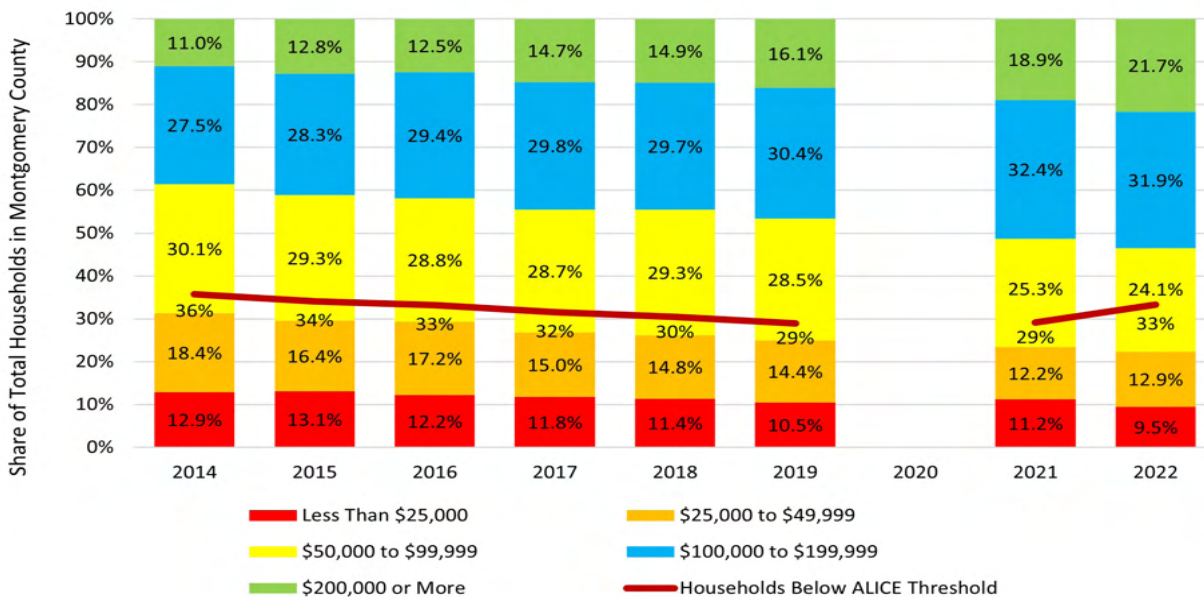
Too many families of all races and ethnicities are facing economic hardship in the county. The method used by the U.S. Census Bureau to measure poverty, while useful, is not robust enough to fully describe the relationship between the income earned by a household and the cost of living for that household. 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, health care, technology, and taxes) for every county in the country.)⁸

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.⁹

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■
The average family of four in Montgomery County would need to make \$88,104 to afford the basics.
■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

This robust ALICE measure finds that a family of two adults and two children would need to make \$88,104, or more than two times the official federal poverty measure, to afford the basics of rent, food, transportation, health insurance, and other essentials.¹⁰ If the family needs child care so the parents can work, their earnings would need to rise to \$108,180.

On Average, a Third of Families with Children are Below the ALICE Threshold in Montgomery County ¹¹



Up to the COVID pandemic, the share of children living in families earning too little to meet their needs trended downward, reaching a low of 29% in 2019.¹² 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 10% of families report being food insecure in 2022, the highest rate since the data has been collected since 2017.¹³

Families are increasingly turning to public benefits to meet their basic needs. Approximately 24,712 children relied on SNAP benefits to avoid hunger, up 13% compared to 2014.¹⁴

Similarly, the number of children benefitting from WIC was at a five-year high of 4,785 in 2024.¹⁵

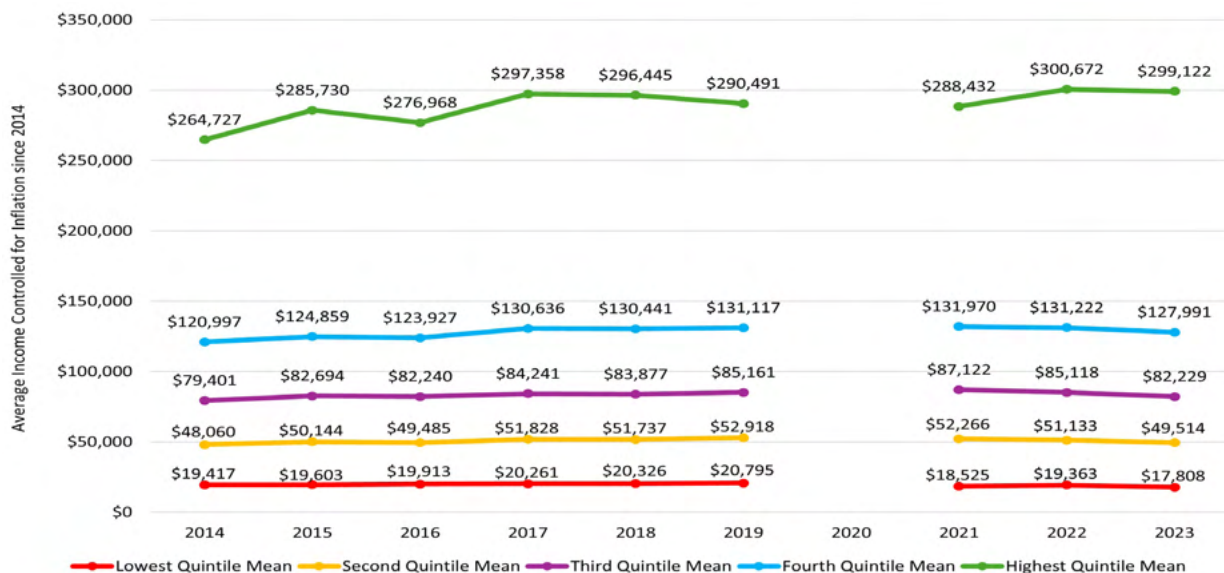
The number of homeless children nearly doubled, reaching a high of 1,321 in the 2024 school year in a period of ostensibly robust income growth in the county.¹⁶ This number is likely a low estimate, given the many workarounds caregivers use to avoid shelters or living on the street, like couch surfing or short-term stays with family or friends.¹⁷

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 78%) and the number of people earning over \$200,000 a year doubled.¹⁸

Although most working adults in Montgomery 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 negative net income growth in the last decade, losing \$1,609 of their annual purchasing power although their incomes rose by 20% in that period.¹⁹ The next lowest 20% income group saw a \$1,454 boost in annual purchasing power despite wage growth increasing over \$16,500 in the decade. In contrast, the top 20% saw their purchasing power grow by \$34,395 in the same period.²⁰

Income Growth Fails to Keep Pace with Inflation in Montgomery County ²¹



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.

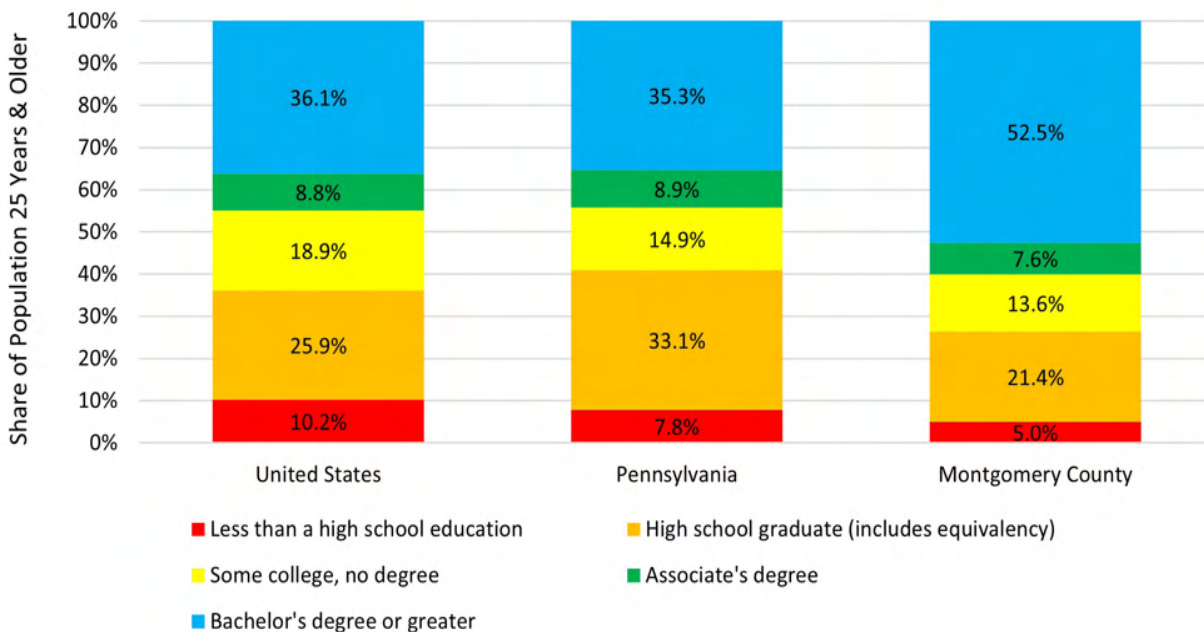
Educational Attainment Challenges Hold Back Economic Prospects

National data demonstrates that adults can substantially boost their earnings capacity if they have some post-secondary training or education.²³ In fact, for Montgomery County families the impact of education is even stronger than the national trend. For families where at least one adult completed some college, their earnings were 27% 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 90% compared to households where at least one caregiver had only a high school diploma.

Fortunately, more Montgomery 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 74% of Montgomery County adults now have some post high school education or training compared to 70% ten years ago.²⁵ That is over 54,000 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 roughly 50,000 in the decade.

Most promising is the increase of adults with four or more years of college, up by five percentage points, or 52,000 more adults in the decade.²⁶

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



As of 2023, Montgomery 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 average median income from approximately \$79,500 to \$107,000 from 2014 to 2023.²⁹



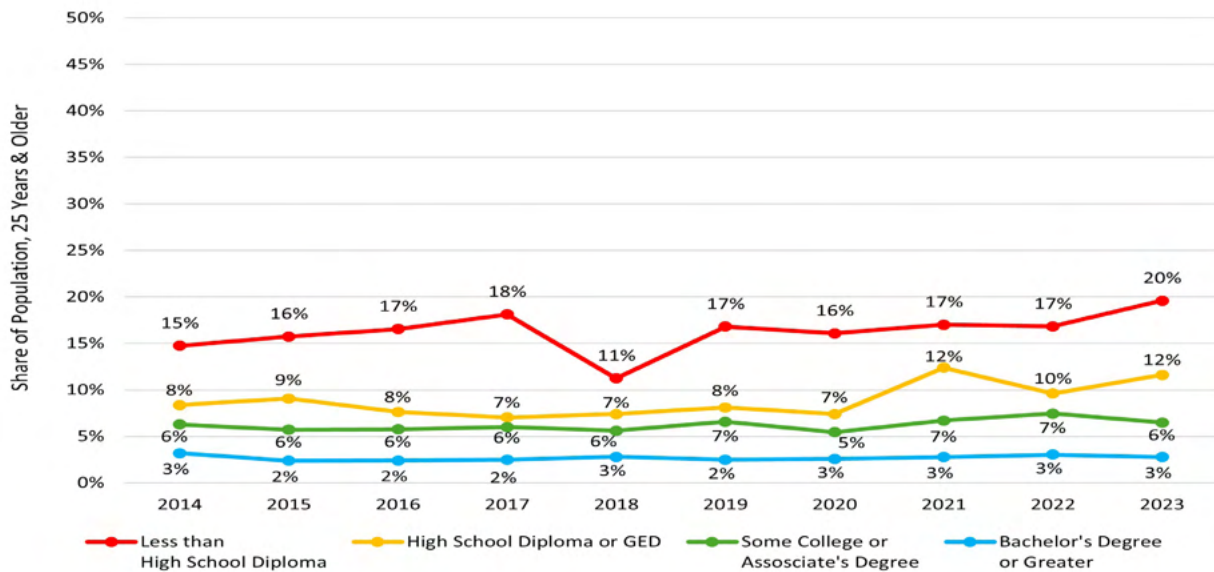
More children are likely to be raised by a parent with at least some college or post-secondary education compared to ten years ago.



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 approximately 20,300 adults in Montgomery County to rise into the middle class based on the latest data from 2023.³⁰

For every individual with a high school diploma or less, there are three individuals with at least some form of a post-secondary education in Montgomery 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

Some College Attendance Cuts Chances of Living in Poverty in Montgomery County by 44%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 Montgomery 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 9% 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 6 and \$3,000 per child up to age 17. This temporary expanded and refundable child tax credit, issued during the pandemic, significantly reduced child poverty by 43% nationwide.³⁴

In Pennsylvania, the impact was even greater, with child poverty rates reduced by 46%.³⁵ In Montgomery County, families across the board benefited from \$243 million through this refundable tax policy.³⁶ Montgomery County families also benefited from \$35 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

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 21,264 Montgomery County families.³⁸

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.



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



Early Childhood Education

High-quality and affordable child care is critical to boosting the economic conditions in low-wealth households by enabling caregivers to work. Families languish on waitlists for child care, while early childhood providers struggle to find enough qualified staff to open up classrooms. In addition, Pennsylvania loses \$6.65 billion annually because of breakdowns in the sector.³⁹ This dysfunction in the child care sector has serious implications for Montgomery 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, 5,587 Montgomery 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.⁴⁰ 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 MONTGOMERY COUNTY

44,632 children under the age of 5 years old

6,620 children eligible for Child Care Works (child care subsidy)

64% of eligible children are NOT enrolled in Child Care Works

Only 28% of child care providers are high-quality but they serve nearly half of eligible children (57%)

5,430 children are eligible for high-quality publicly funded pre-k

67% of eligible children are NOT enrolled in publicly funded pre-k

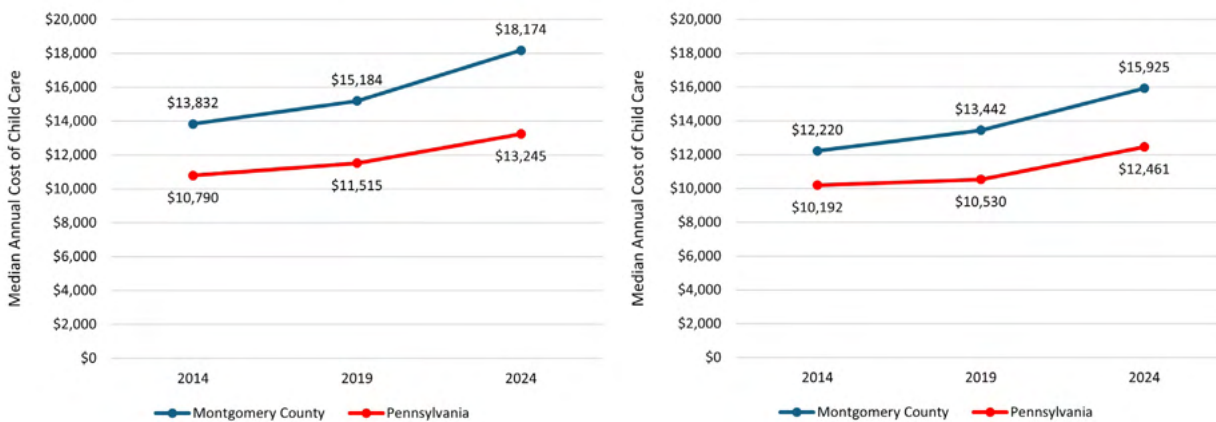
256 unfilled staff positions in child care programs

2,508 children could be served if child care programs were fully staffed

Without Help, Families Really Struggle to Cover Costs

Montgomery County is home to 44,632 children under the age of five, and their parents face steep costs when it comes to early education and care.⁴¹ County residents pay \$4,261 more for infant care than the rest of Pennsylvania; toddler care costs \$3,644 more.⁴² Little progress has been made to bring those costs down. In fact, infant care costs in Montgomery County increased by 31% and toddler care rose 30% from 2014 to 2024. In 2024, the average family spent nearly 14% of their household budget on infant care, almost twice the federal recommendation of 7%.⁴³

The Median Annual Cost of Infant or Toddler Child Care is More Expensive in Montgomery County than the Average Statewide Cost ⁴⁴



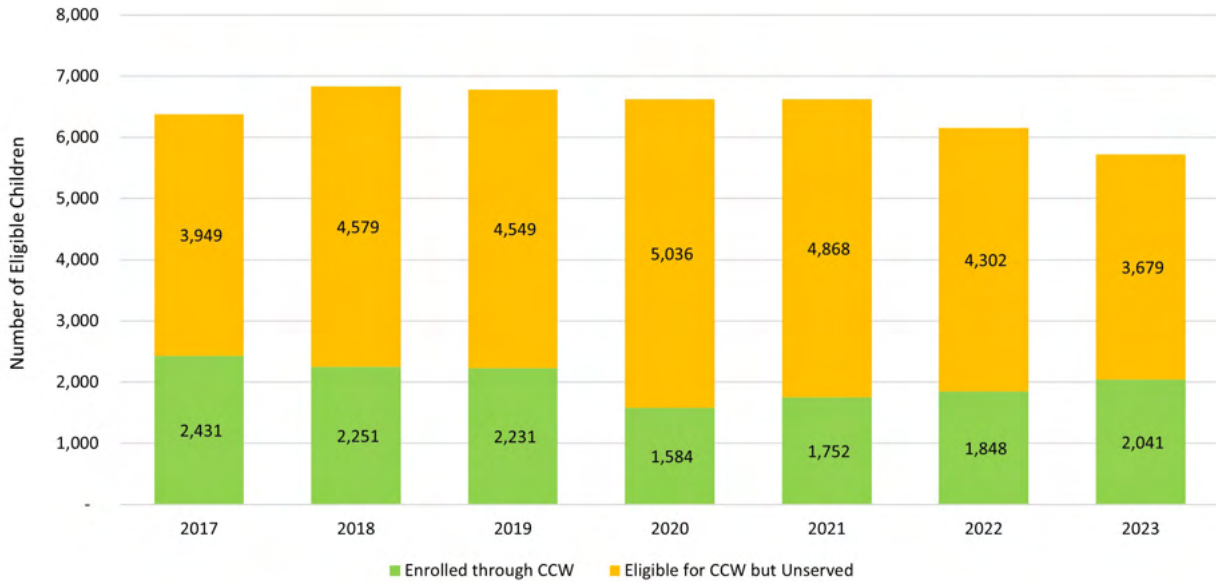
Given the high out-of-pocket cost of child care, state programs like Child Care Works, which provides subsidies to low-income working families, can be a game changer—offsetting the cost of care so parents can work while their children are cared for and educated. Yet 64% of eligible children are not enrolled in Child Care Works.⁴⁵ 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 Montgomery County has remained stable, chronic staffing shortages have forced providers to close classrooms and turn away 900 children in 2024, a number equivalent to two entire public elementary schools.⁴⁶ 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 Montgomery County was \$33,161 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.⁴⁷

64% of Eligible Children in Montgomery County Cannot Enroll in Subsidized Care Because of Persistent Staffing and Provider Shortages⁴⁸



Their counterparts in the K-12 education system make more than double at \$74,213. Even retail workers make more money than child care staff, approximately \$6,617 more a year.⁴⁹ It is no surprise then, that providers have struggled to compete with other sectors to hire and retain staff.

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. It also contributes to resiliency, which increases the likelihood of children being able to rebound from traumatic events.⁵⁰

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 the quality of early learning programs, 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.

14%

Young families in Montgomery County spend

14%

of their income on child care;

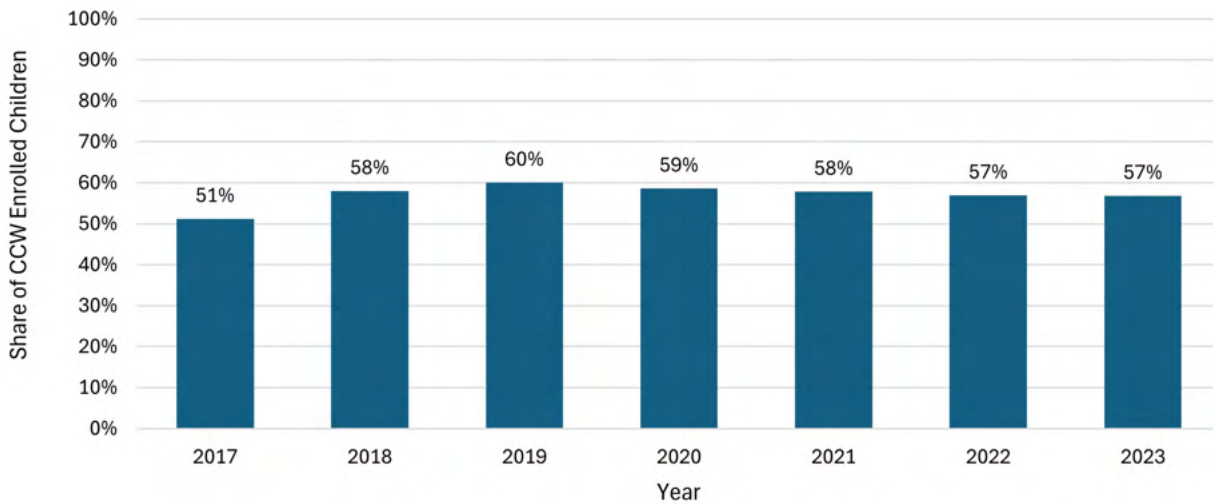
almost twice the federal recommended standard.

While the number of Montgomery County children attending high-quality programs has increased over time, unfortunately, 43% 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



While access to affordable child care has continued to be a concern for policymakers, it is also important that programs be high quality. Program quality is an indicator for whether children are receiving the type of education that can build the foundation for life-long success. Children who have access to high-quality early education are more likely to perform better academically in school, which thus leads to more promising career prospects and earning potential later on in life.

The Share of Low-Income Children Under Five in High-Quality Child Care Programs Remained Relatively Unchanged in Montgomery County, 2017-2023⁵²



K-12 Education

Over the last ten years, gaps in school quality and funding have plagued some Montgomery 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 Montgomery County students from low-income households are still just as likely as they were ten years ago to attend schools that do not have sufficient funds to 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 give kids access to full-day kindergarten. In Montgomery County, every school district but Spring-Ford now offers full-day kindergarten to at least some of their students, with Lower Merion and Perkiomen Valley adding full-day kindergarten programs for the first time in 2024. This leaves 1,191 kindergarteners without the extra support to boost their foundational learning.⁵³ It can also save, compared to working parents whose school only offers half-day kindergarten and may need to pay for childcare or private half-day kindergarten.⁵⁴

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.⁵⁵ Just two-thirds of Montgomery County's third graders can read on grade level and only three in five eighth graders are proficient in math – both major predictors of future success.

EDUCATION FAST FACTS FOR MONTGOMERY COUNTY

108,163 Montgomery County students enrolled in traditional public schools across 21 school districts

1,173 students enrolled in 22 brick-and-mortar charter schools with tuition costs totaling \$20,882,579

1,715 students registered in 13 cyber charter schools with tuition costs totaling \$37,125,689

4.8% of students are English Language Learners

Twenty out of 21 school districts offer full day kindergarten

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

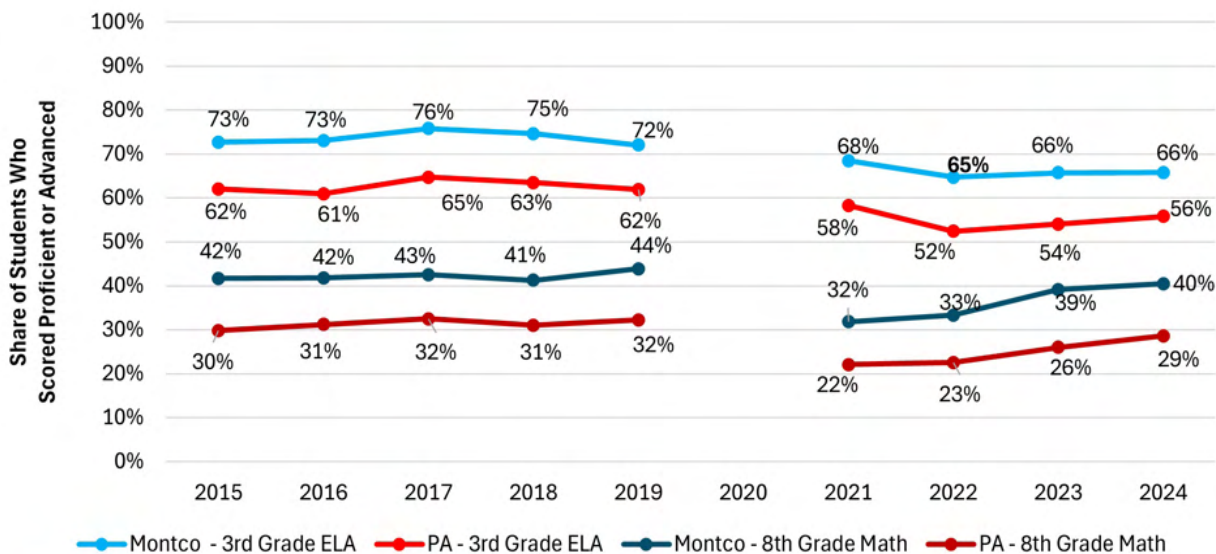
Two districts, teaching 11% of Montgomery County have a remaining adequacy gap of \$48 million

Only 66% of third graders can pass English assessments

Only 40% of eighth graders can pass math assessments

Montgomery County outperforms the statewide average in third grade ELA and eighth grade math.⁵⁶ However, within the county there are stark differences by school district.

Student Performance Suffered and is Still Recovering from COVID Learning Disruptions⁵⁷



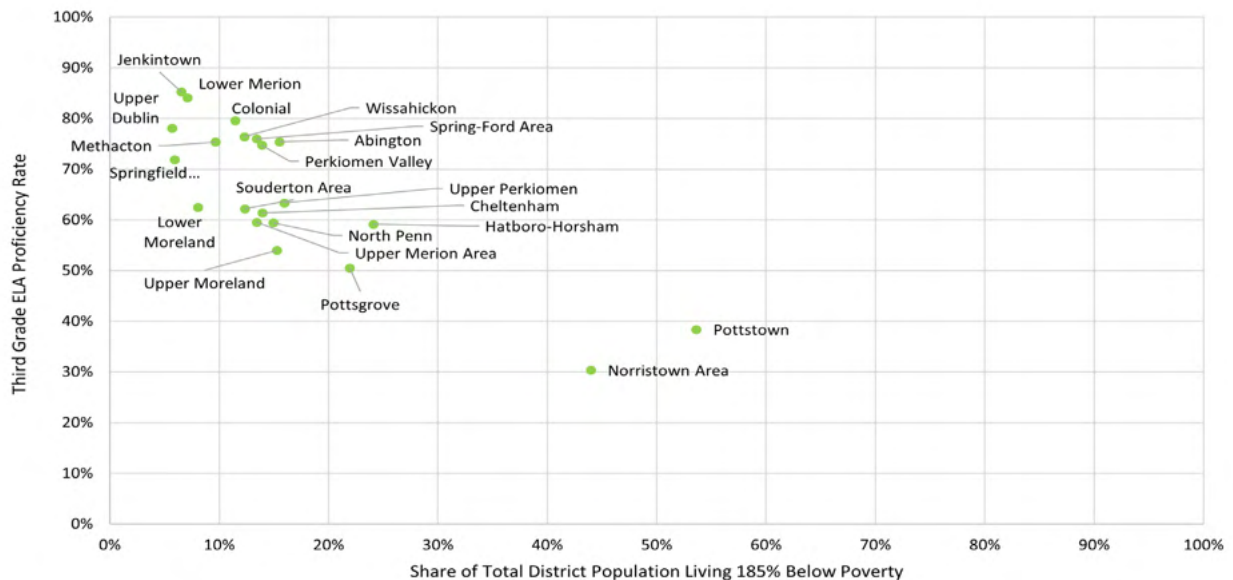
Students in Low-Wealth Districts Lag in Reading and Math Skills

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.^{57,58} In Montgomery County, 36% of all third graders (2,624) cannot read proficiently – enough to fill 36 school buses with three kids to a seat!^{59,60} The school districts in the county’s highest-poverty communities have the fewest students who can pass the reading test.⁶¹

In Pottstown and Norristown, only about one third of third graders are reading on grade level. Just a few miles away in Jenkintown and Lower Merion, 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 the recently debunked “whole language” approach to teaching reading that has produced dismal reading outcomes for decades.⁶²

Fewer Third Graders in Montgomery County Can Read Proficiently in High-Poverty School Districts ⁶³



This “whole language” approach does not work for all students, especially students who have dyslexia or another learning challenge, are learning English, did not receive high-quality instruction in prior years, or whose parents don’t have strong literacy skills to support them.

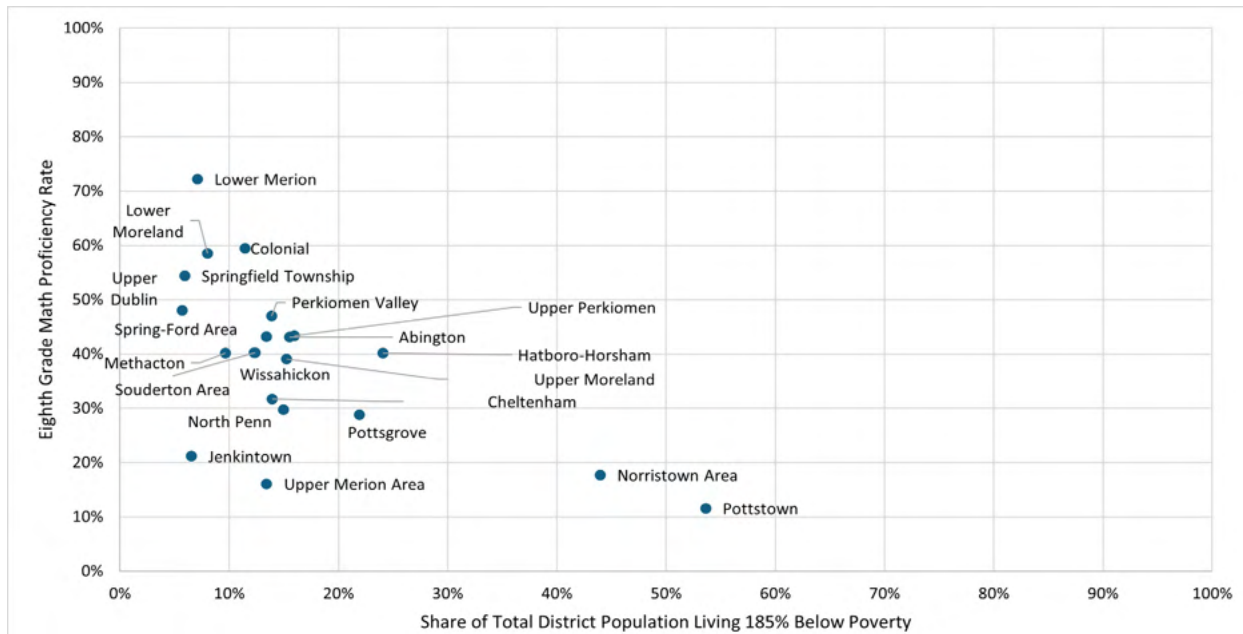
An evidence-based “science of reading” approach offers instructional practices that teachers can use to support all learners. Training teachers and providing them updated curriculum can transform learning outcomes, and it has worked in states like Mississippi.⁶⁴ However, curriculum change is not a quick fix. It is only successful when teachers participate in the process and school districts provide extensive coaching to help teachers implement it well.⁶⁵

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.⁶⁶

Eighth grade math proficiency is at a crisis point in Montgomery County, where 4,423 eighth graders cannot demonstrate proficiency.⁶⁷ Math proficiency is the lowest in the most poverty-stricken school district, Pottstown.⁶⁸ Even in the school districts with the highest math proficiency levels, less than three quarters of eighth graders can pass the test.



Eighth Graders in Montgomery County are at a Crisis Point in Math Proficiency in Low-Wealth School Districts ⁶⁹



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.⁷⁰



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 Montgomery County students at a disadvantage in college and career.

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

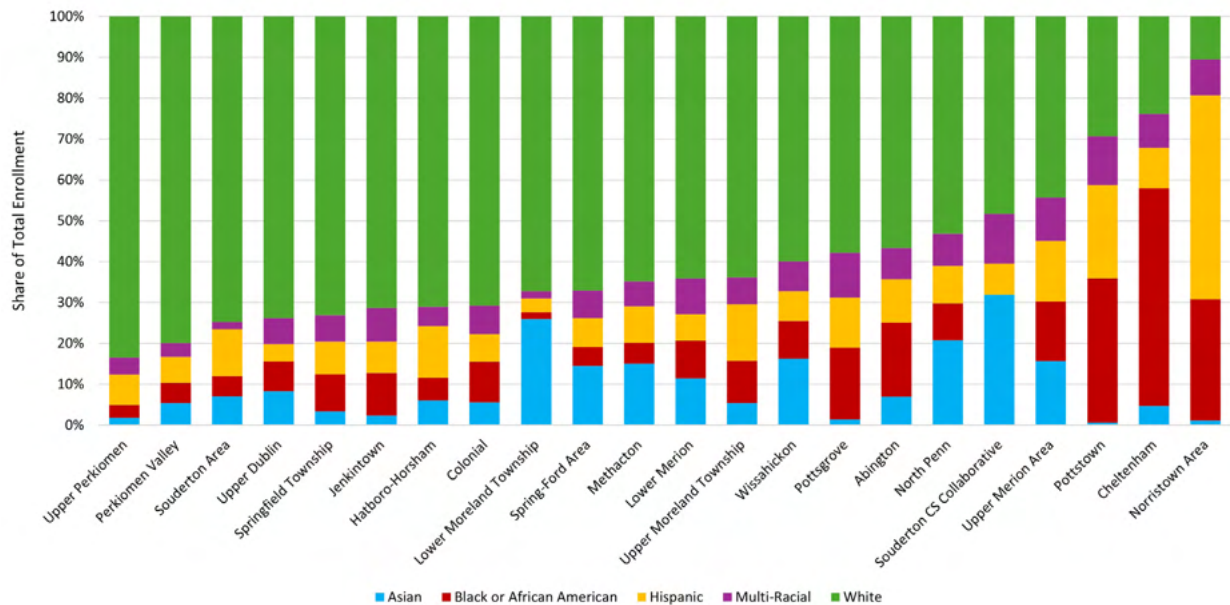
Students of color and those from low-income families are clustered in a handful of school districts and charter schools in Montgomery County. These are the school districts with the lowest-value housing stock, which in turn generates the least revenue to fund their local schools.

For example, Pottstown School District’s property tax rate of 30.8 mills generates \$10,882 per student.⁷¹ Meanwhile, Upper Merion School District’s tax rate of 11.6 mills produces \$23,277 per student because their housing values are so much higher than those in Pottstown.

Upper Merion’s local taxes give the district more than twice as much per student at less than 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.

Underfunding is a Pennsylvania problem, not just a Montgomery 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.⁷² That is 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.

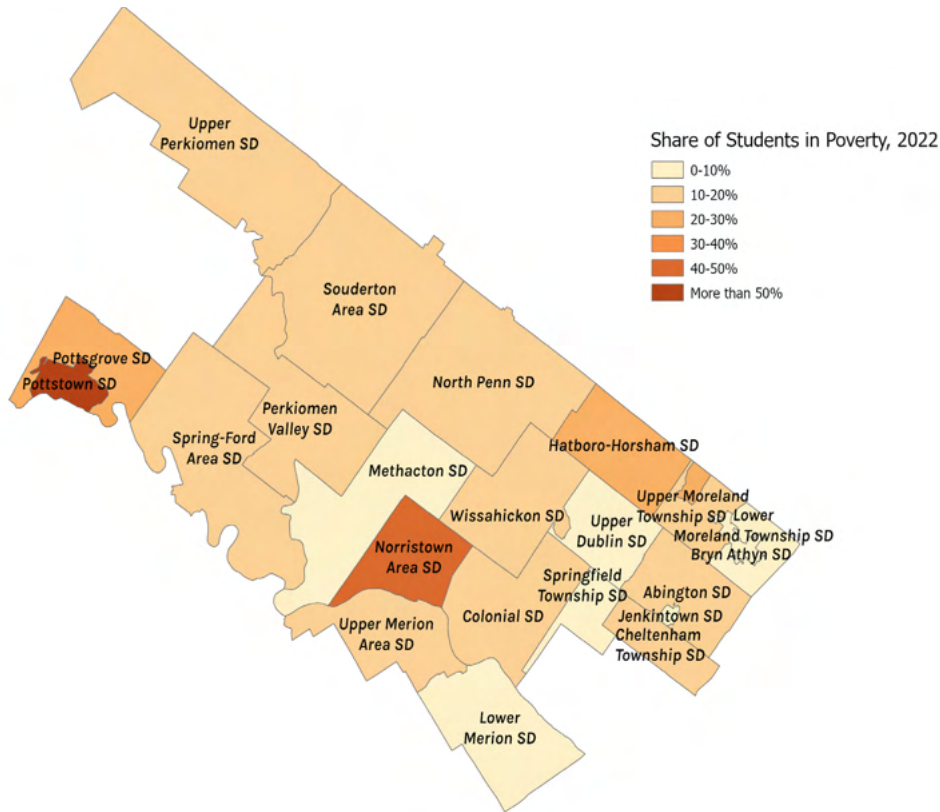
Montgomery County’s Black and Hispanic Students are Clustered in a Few School Districts and Charter Schools ^{73,74}



Because a Pennsylvania community’s wealth is often correlated with its racial makeup, the schools with the highest shares of Black and Hispanic, and low-income students have the least funding to educate their students.

Approximately 18,015 public school students in Montgomery County live in poverty.⁷⁵ Overall, the number of students living in poverty has decreased over the last nine years, but the number and share of students in poverty increased in three school districts: Lower Merion, Spring-Ford, and Wissahickon.⁷⁶ With the exception of the very small district of Jenkintown, every school district in Montgomery County serves at least 150 students who live in poverty, with many school districts educating thousands of students whose families cannot make ends meet. Numbers this large require a robust and dedicated plan to educate these students who are the county’s future.

Students from Low-Wealth Families Concentrated in Four School Districts⁷⁷

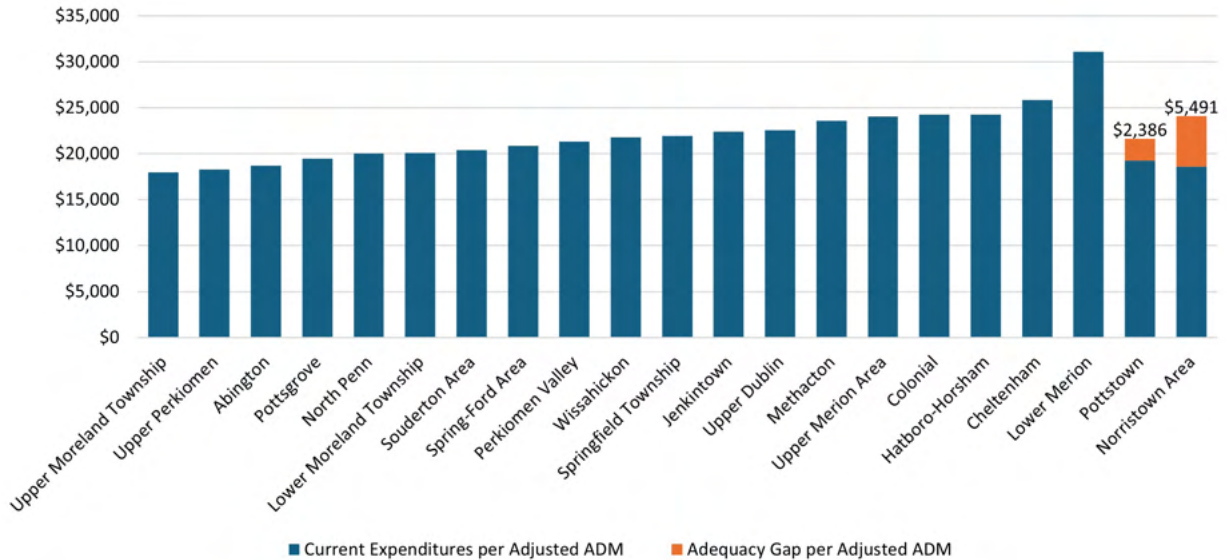


The State School Funding Adequacy Gap Persists

To build an effective education system in Montgomery 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 right to a thorough and efficient education – one that provides basic needs like reasonable class sizes, updated textbooks, and tutoring programs. The state measured the total school funding shortfall to be \$4.5 billion; Montgomery County’s total shortfall was measured at over \$54 million.⁷⁸

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. 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. There is currently no timeline for when the state will release the remainder of the adequacy funds.

Two Montgomery County School Districts Need More Funding to Adequately Educate Each Student ⁸¹



Two school districts in Montgomery County qualify for adequacy funds, which will reach 11,860 students or 11% of students in the county.⁷⁹ The first \$6 million in adequacy funds was released in 2024 leaving a \$48 million adequacy gap to fill.⁸⁰ The other nineteen 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.⁸² Although the FY2024 state budget added \$30 million more for CTE, an overall lack of state investment and outdated policies obstruct more students from accessing these effective programs.⁸³

As a result, less than 6% of Montgomery County high school students (2,126) are enrolled as CTE concentrators, the third lowest share of the five southeastern Pennsylvania counties.⁸⁴ (A CTE concentrator is a student who successfully completes at least half of their CTE coursework.)

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



Enrolled in Career/Technical Education

Unfortunately, the number of students in these promising programs virtually saw no change in Montgomery County since 2014. The county's enrollment of CTE concentrators witnessed a slight decline from 2016 up through the pandemic before recovering to 2014 levels by 2024.

Furthermore, whereas over half of statewide CTE concentrators come from families in poverty, less than a third (32%) of Montgomery County CTE concentrators come from poverty.⁸⁵ The county's low participation from poverty-stricken students is disheartening, as CTE programs are proven to improve students' ability to graduate high school on-time and receive high-paying jobs that result in economic mobility.^{86,87}

Promisingly though is the fact that Montgomery County CTE concentrators are outperforming their peers across the state. Over 45% of the county's CTE students pursued a postsecondary education, compared to a third of CTE students statewide.⁸⁸

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).⁸⁹ 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.⁹⁰

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.⁹¹

Across Montgomery County in 2023, 77 teacher and school worker positions were unfilled and an additional 30 positions were being temporarily filled by substitutes.⁹² The school districts with the most vacancies were those with the lowest funds: Norristown and Pottstown.



Montgomery County has among the most experienced teacher workforce in the region. Every school district and charter school has an average teacher experience level of over 10 years, and teacher experience levels average over 17 years of experience at Jenkintown, Lower Merion, Upper Dublin, Perkiomen Valley, and Souderton CS Collaborative.⁹³

To attract new teachers, school districts need to offer competitive starting salaries but there are wide gaps in starting pay ranging from \$45,500 in Pottstown to \$62,500 in Upper Dublin.⁹⁴ Differences in teacher salaries make it much more attractive for teachers to choose wealthier school districts, exacerbating educational inequities.

Charter School Costs Rise Faster Than Other Costs

When it comes to funding, charter school tuition continues to divert funds away from the traditional public school system and it has done so for more than ten years.

Montgomery County's school districts pay more than \$37 million to cyber charter schools where student achievement is far worse than students at traditional public schools.⁹⁵ Cyber tuition costs have increased by 143% in eight years.

Montgomery County school districts paid an additional \$20 million to brick and mortar charter schools, an increase of 55% in the same period.⁹⁶

Cyber charter school payments in Montgomery County rose by

143%
in eight years,

reaching

\$37
million



Child Health

Montgomery County ranks fifth among Pennsylvania's counties for overall well-being according to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's 2024 County Health Rankings, reflecting its generally strong health indicators and high median income.⁹⁷ However, these metrics can obscure the realities faced by the county's most vulnerable populations, including uninsured families, those experiencing homelessness, and individuals grappling with food insecurity. Environmental and systemic inequities also disproportionately impact marginalized communities, as evidenced by the Environmental Protection Agency's environmental justice screening tool, which highlights risks such as proximity to superfund sites and lead exposure in certain areas.

Montgomery County has taken several steps to address these inequities. Recent investments include \$18 million for a Behavioral Health Crisis Center, \$3.5 million to support child care centers, \$500,000 for local food pantries, and \$1 million for Project CARE, which aids young families affected by domestic violence.^{98,99,100,101} Together these investments reflect an acknowledgment of the social determinants of health.

The launch of the new Food Policy Council and strategic solutions outlined in a county homelessness task force report also signal a commitment to addressing housing and food insecurity.¹⁰² Furthermore, Montgomery County has expanded paid parental leave to 16 weeks for county employees, recognizing the importance of family support in improving health outcomes.

Despite these efforts, challenges persist. Focus groups conducted for the county's 2022 Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) identified barriers such as limited transportation, long wait times for behavioral health services, and insufficient support for residents

CHILD HEALTH FAST FACTS FOR MONTGOMERY COUNTY

In 2023, 62,810 children in Montgomery County were on Medicaid and 4,063 were on CHIP

In 2023, 8,997 children were affected by Medicaid unwinding, primarily due to procedural disenrollments

5,901 children in Montgomery County are uninsured

69% of Montgomery County children are still not screened for lead

Noncompliance with vaccines for kindergarten students doubled from 2016 to 2024

15% of Montgomery County 12th graders considered suicide; 4% reported attempting suicide

36% of students report feeling sad or depressed most days

The teen pregnancy rate in Montgomery County fell from 15 to 11 pregnancies per 1,000 females aged 15-19¹⁰³

There is one licensed mental health provider for every 230 Montgomery County residents

with limited English proficiency.¹⁰⁴ These challenges are particularly significant for underserved communities, where disparities in access to care and resources remain stark. Additionally, language access has become a pressing concern as the county’s Spanish-speaking population has doubled nearly every decade for the past 30 years.^{105, 106}

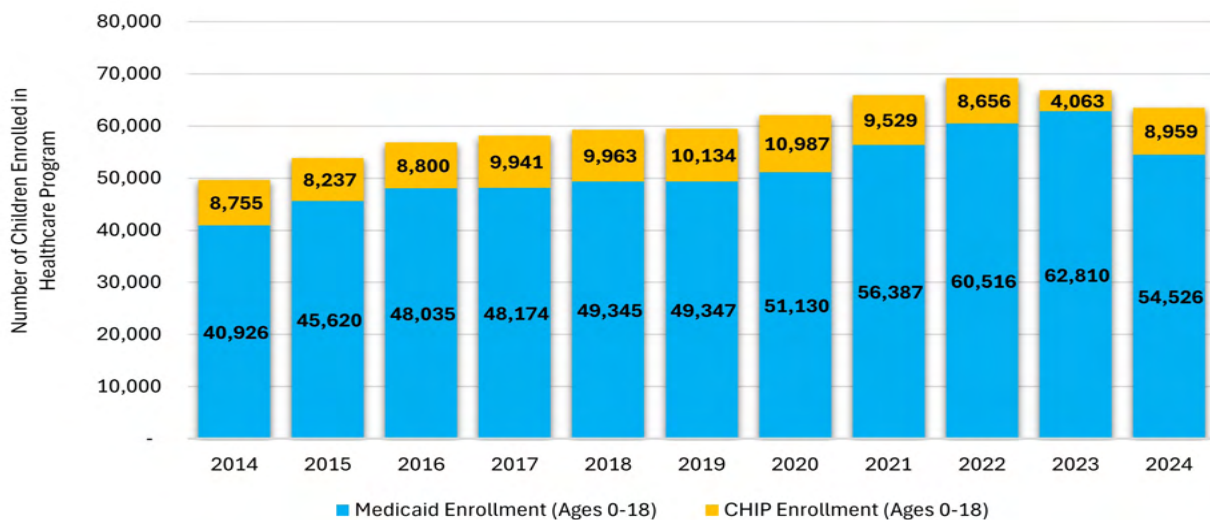
Montgomery County’s initiatives demonstrate a commitment to tackling systemic inequities, but sustained efforts are needed to ensure that these investments translate into measurable improvements for all residents. Addressing barriers such as transportation, language access, and systemic discrimination will be critical to advancing equity and ensuring that all children and families have the resources they need to thrive.

Medicaid Processes Cause Thousands of Children to Lose Access to Health Care

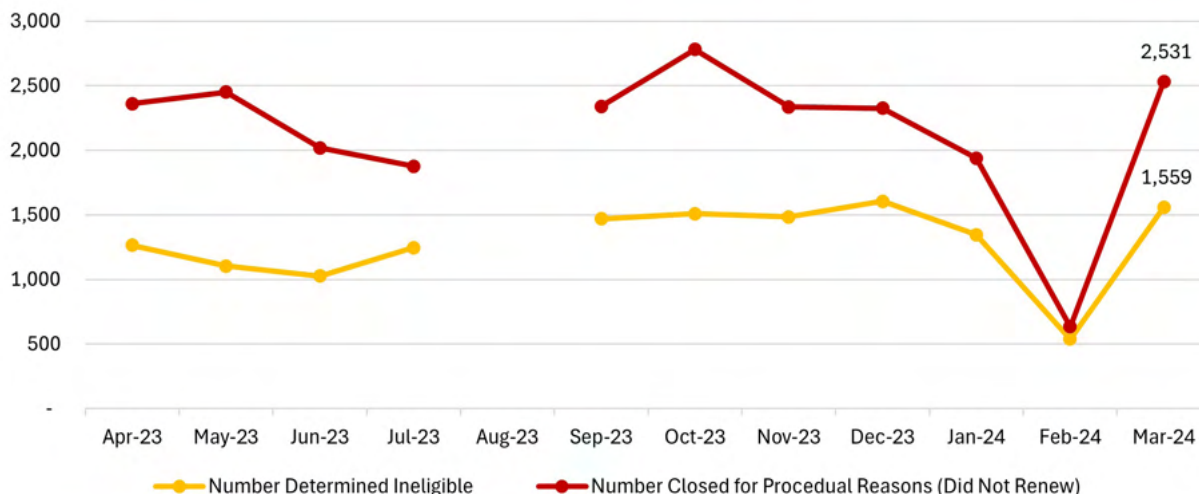
As the county increases its focus on improving the health of its children, state and federal Medicaid policies are making it harder to ensure that children are doing better. Healthcare access for children in Montgomery County is closely tied to Medicaid, a critical support for families with limited income who cannot afford private insurance.

From 2014 to 2023, Medicaid enrollment for children in Montgomery County steadily increased, peaking at 62,810 in 2023. 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 54,526 – a loss of 8,284 children.¹⁰⁷

New Downward Trend in Medicaid Enrollment Likely Means Fewer Children Have Health Insurance¹⁰⁸



The Number of Children Disenrolled from Medicaid is Rising ¹⁰⁹



This is primarily due to post-pandemic procedural disenrollments associated with change in federal rules requiring families to re-enroll. (This process is often referred to as “Medicaid unwinding.”)

For many families, the complexity of re-enrollment requirements – such as submitting digital documents or meeting strict deadlines – proved insurmountable. Families with housing instability, limited digital access, or limited English proficiency are disproportionately impacted, as these obstacles hinder their ability to complete re-enrollment processes on time. Without Medicaid, children with diagnosed health conditions lose access to specialized services, risking gaps in care, treatment disruptions, and higher out-of-pocket costs.

Since Medicaid renewal requirements resumed, families in Montgomery County have faced significant challenges in maintaining this coverage. Between April 2023 and March 2024, more than 2,000 Montgomery County children lost their Medicaid coverage every month not because of ineligibility, but because of procedural barriers stemming from the unwinding.¹¹⁰

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, Montgomery County counted 9,455 children enrolled on Medicaid based on a diagnosed disability, including physical, intellectual, developmental, or psychiatric disability. This is an increase of 900 children since 2022 despite the high percentage of disenrollment.^{111,112}

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■
Medicaid enrollment dropped sharply in 2024 to 54,526 - a loss of coverage for 8,284 children.
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Loss of coverage for procedural reasons disproportionately affects children with special health needs whose access to essential mental health services depends on maintaining Medicaid enrollment. When children lose Medicaid coverage, they often miss preventive care and treatment for chronic conditions, as well as essential mental health services. For example, a child with untreated asthma may require emergency care for preventable attacks, while a child with a behavioral health condition may face treatment delays that exacerbate their symptoms.

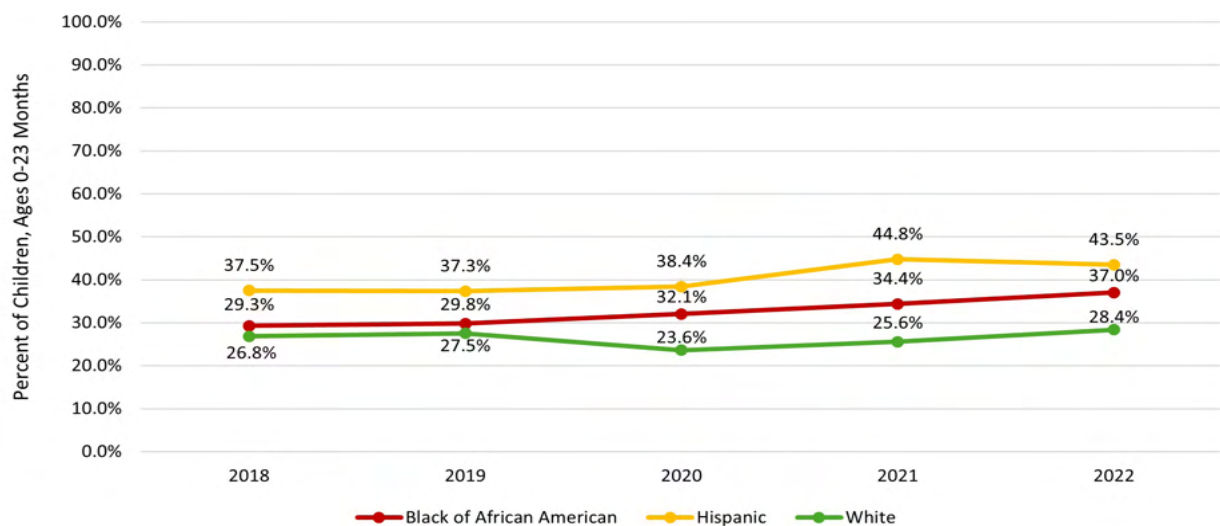
Environmental Factors Increase Childhood Illness

Beyond healthcare access, environmental health justice remains a critical issue in Montgomery 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, preterm births and lead poisoning. 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 Montgomery County, particularly in areas where 65% of the housing stock was built before lead-based paint was banned in 1978.¹¹³ Lead poisoning is linked to irreversible cognitive and behavioral damage, contributing to poorer academic performance and long-term economic disadvantages for affected children.¹¹⁴

Less than 45% of Children are Tested for Lead Exposure ¹¹⁵



Additionally, the financial burden on the healthcare and education systems is significant as children with elevated blood lead levels (EBLL) often require specialized medical care and support services.

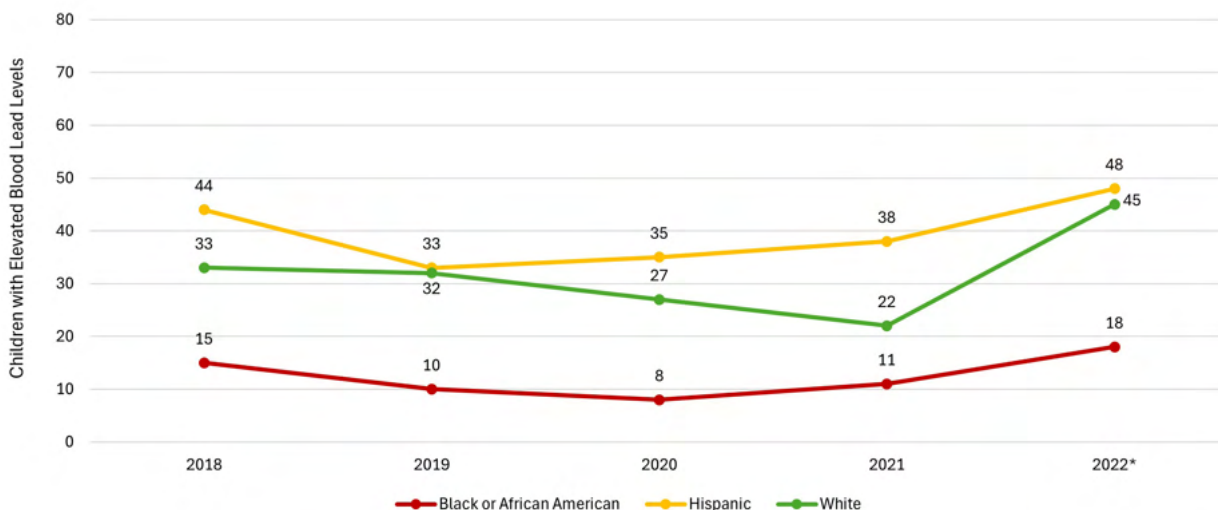
69% of children in Montgomery County are not screened for exposure to toxic lead.

This exposure poses severe risks to cognitive, behavioral, and physical development. Data from 2022 shows that only 31% of children under age two were tested for lead, which is an improvement over previous years. Hispanic children had the highest lead testing rates (44%), followed by Black children (37%) and white children (28%). These higher rates of testing among Hispanic and Black children are linked to higher rates of Medicaid coverage within these populations; Medicaid requires lead testing that least twice before the age of two.¹¹⁶

Despite improved testing rates compared to previous years, about 69% of Montgomery County children were still not screened for lead, leaving a significant portion of the population vulnerable to undetected exposure.¹¹⁷

While Black children have historically faced disproportionately high rates of elevated blood lead levels (EBLLs), Montgomery County follows a different pattern. In Montgomery County, Hispanic and white children have higher rates of lead poisoning than Black children.¹¹⁸

Hispanic and White Children Face High Risks of Lead Exposure ¹¹⁹



This disparity is likely due to differences in housing conditions, as Hispanic and 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.

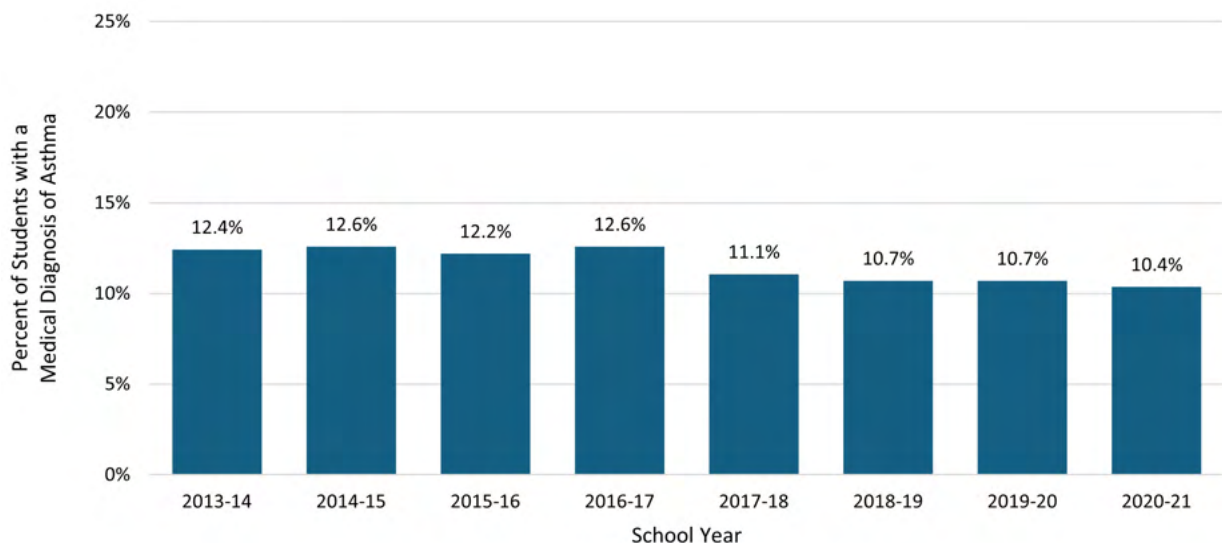
In 2022, the CDC lowered the blood lead reference level from 5 µg/dL to 3.5 µg/dL, reflecting growing evidence that no level of lead exposure is safe for children.¹²⁰ This adjustment enhances early detection of lead exposure’s harmful effects but may create the perception of rising EBLR rates when, in fact, the change reflects a more sensitive standard. Lead education and prevention measures by county agencies are therefore critical.

Progress on Childhood Asthma

Childhood asthma remains a key environmental health concern in Montgomery 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.¹²¹ 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.

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 and outdoor air quality and expanding public health initiatives targeting asthma triggers are essential steps toward ensuring equitable outcomes for all children.

Share of Students with Asthma Dropped by Two Points¹²²



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

Environmental health disparities in Montgomery County also extend to maternal and infant health, as evidenced by rising preterm birth rates. From 2016 to 2023, overall preterm births across all races appear to have plateaued around 8%. When disaggregated by race, however, disparities emerge. Black mothers experience the highest rates of preterm births at 12%, followed by 10% for Hispanic mothers, Asian mothers at 8%, and white mothers at 8%.¹²³ These disparities highlight the disproportionate burden on Black mothers, who consistently face the highest rates in Montgomery County and across Pennsylvania. Environmental stressors, including air pollution, inadequate and/or unstable housing, and limited access to quality prenatal care, play a significant role in these inequities.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■
Black mothers experience the highest rates of preterm births at 12%.
■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

However, progress is being made through legislative action. In 2024, the Pennsylvania state legislature passed two key provisions that extend Medicaid coverage for doula services and raise awareness about postpartum depression and centralize counseling resources. These measures aim to provide critical support for pregnant and postpartum individuals, especially in underserved communities.¹²⁴ While these efforts are a step forward, more work needs to be done.

Vaccination Compliance Rates Worsened

Childhood vaccination rates in Montgomery 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 from 95% to 93% during the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years after a decade of stability.¹²⁵ Coverage failed to return to pre-pandemic levels in 2022-23, compounded by vaccine misinformation, hesitancy, and more exemptions.¹²⁶

The share of children in Montgomery County starting school without required vaccinations **increased by 71%** since 2016.



From 2016 to 2024, the non-medical exemption rate of Montgomery County kindergarteners nearly doubled, from 2.1% to 3.6%.^{127,128} 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.

These shifts have real-world consequences. Montgomery County is facing a troubling rise in pertussis cases, with outbreaks reported in two school districts and a rate of 3.2 per 100,000 residents—more than double Pennsylvania’s statewide rate of 1.5. Pennsylvania has experienced a staggering tenfold increase to over 2,000 cases – the highest in the nation.^{129,130,131} 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

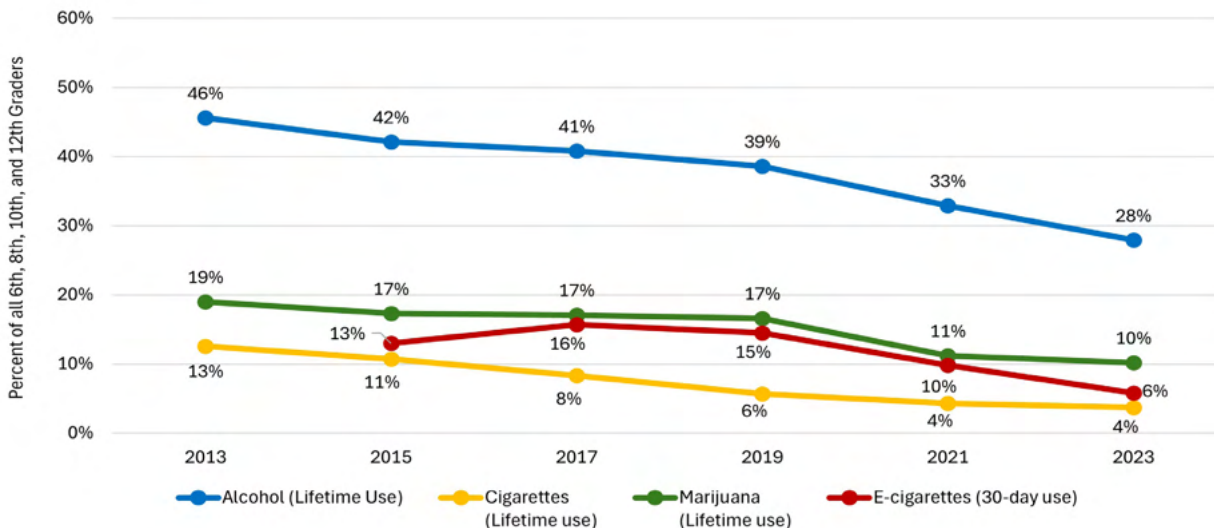
One in five children experience a mental, emotional, or behavioral health disorder.¹³² Alarming, in Montgomery County this translates to at least 35,989 children, and fewer than half of them will receive the treatment they need due to barriers of care. This crisis is exacerbated by the shortage of mental health providers, a systemic issue seen nationwide. Families in Montgomery 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 230 Montgomery County residents.¹³³

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. 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 all risk behaviors, substance use plummeted in the last decade. The percentage of Montgomery County students grades six to twelve who report lifetime use of alcohol has decreased from 46% of students in 2013 to only 28% in 2023. Similarly, marijuana use fell from 19% to 10%, and cigarette use declined from 13% to 4% over the same period.¹³⁴ According to Montgomery County health officials, the decrease in these risk behaviors does not appear to be attributable to any specific public health campaign or intervention.

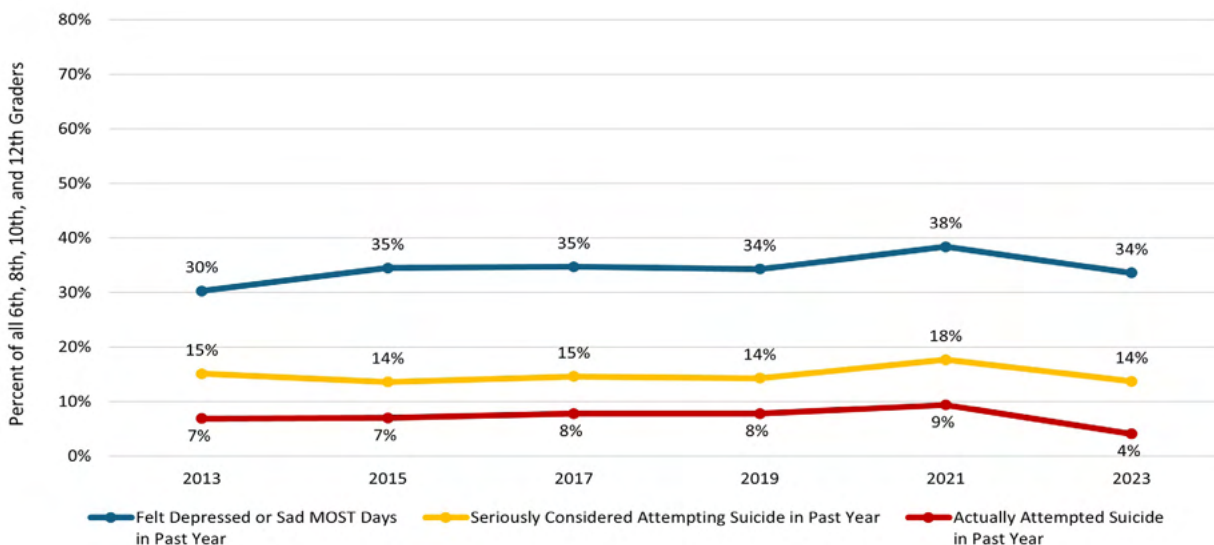
Risky Youth Behaviors Show Precipitous Drop ¹³⁵



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.¹³⁶ Although Montgomery County’s data mirrors statewide and national trends with fewer children engaging in risk behaviors, this decline has not corresponded with an improvement in mental health, with children continuing to experience high rates of depression, anxiety, stress, and suicidal ideation. Children and youth have been struggling with the same levels of depression and anxiety for the last decade, although the perception is that mental health challenges spiked only during (and because of) the pandemic.

Stubbornly High Indicators of Mental Distress Went Unabated ¹³⁷



Among sixth to twelfth graders in Montgomery 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 34% in 2023, rising to 38% in 2021 in relation to COVID school closures.¹³⁸

In Montgomery County, students who considered suicide and attempted suicide peaked in 2021, although the trendline shows less dramatic change – 15% of Montgomery County students considered suicide in 2013, compared with 14% in 2023.¹³⁹ This is in alignment with the data on depression and sadness, showing that levels of suicidal ideation have remained relatively consistent in the last decade. While the percentage of students who attempted suicide dropped from 7% 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.”¹⁴⁰ 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.¹⁴¹

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.

Montgomery 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 6,119 calls from Montgomery County residents.¹⁴²

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

Substantiated Cases of Abuse or Neglect Return to Ten Year High

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 shows that family adversity, including poverty, is linked to a higher occurrence of abuse and neglect.¹⁴³ Abuse, neglect, and placement in foster care are all associated with a greater likelihood of mental health challenges, substance use, and poor educational outcomes.^{144,145,146}

Over the past eight years, the number of substantiated child abuse and neglect reports in Montgomery County has fluctuated. Calls to the hotline peaked in 2017 at 1,777, but just 117 of those were substantiated.¹⁴⁷ Following a decline in reports and substantiated cases during the pandemic, there were 140 substantiated abuse and neglect reports in 2021 and 148 substantiated reports in 2022, the highest in the past decade.

CHILD WELFARE FAST FACTS FOR MONTGOMERY COUNTY

148 substantiated reports of child abuse and neglect

2,400 children receiving in-home services

156 children entering foster care

60 children in congregate care (institution and group home)

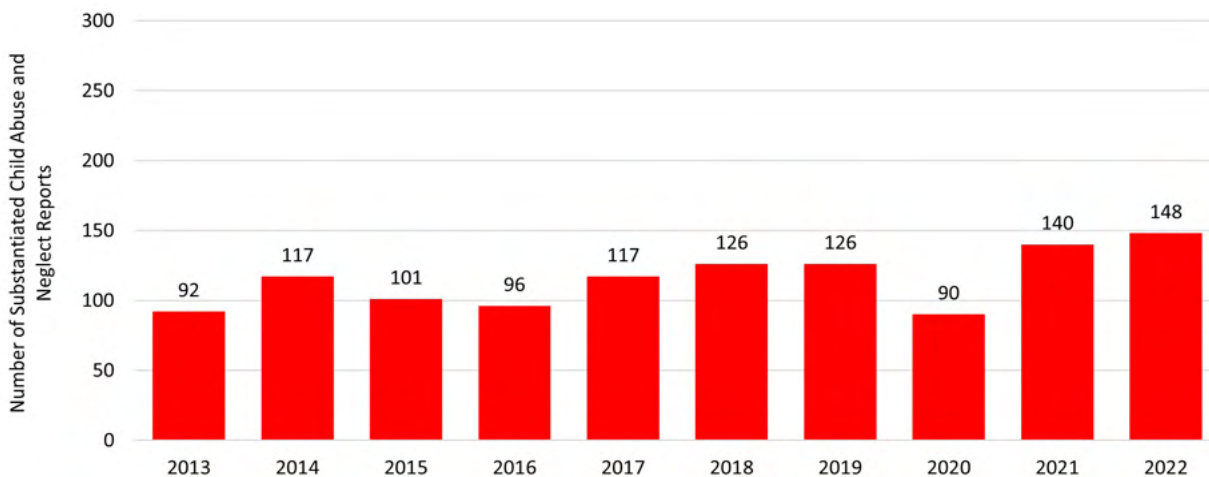
JUVENILE JUSTICE FAST FACTS FOR MONTGOMERY COUNTY

771 youth arrests

210 secure detention admissions

46 long-term facility placements

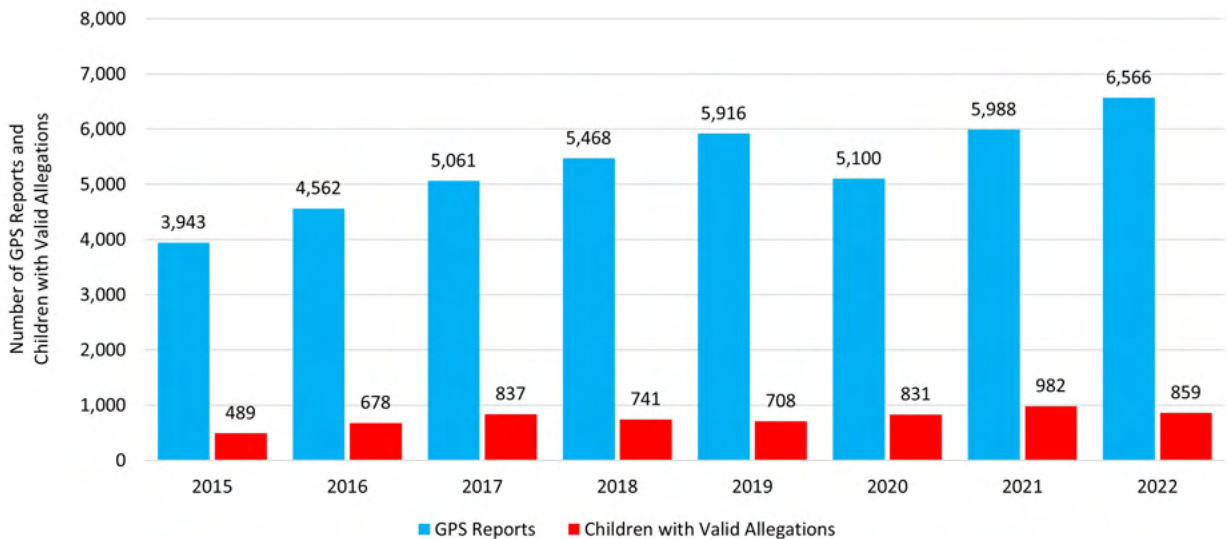
Substantiated Cases of Abuse or Neglect Reach Ten Year High¹⁴⁸



Experts agree that the increase in overall reports and substantiated/valid reports following the 2020 pandemic can be attributed to several factors, such as families’ return to regular contact with schools, medical offices, social services, and other reporting sources, along with economic and social toll of the pandemic on family stability and well-being.

If a report does not rise to the level of abuse or neglect but states that a family needs services, it is assigned as General Protective Services (GPS). The number of valid GPS reports doubled from 489 in 2015 to a high of 982 in 2021. ¹⁴⁹ In 2022, there was a slight decline to 859 valid GPS reports.

Annually, Hundreds of Children and their Families Need Services to Reduce the Risk of Abuse and Neglect ¹⁵⁰



Instead of removing children from their home when the only concerns can be attributed to poverty (like insufficient food or inadequate housing), the Montgomery County Office of Children and Youth refers families to community supports and continues to work with them. In 2022, 2,994 Montgomery 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.¹⁵¹ This represents an increase from 2014, when 2,400 children received services in their homes.¹⁵²

This trend reflects a sector-wide shift in focus toward maintaining families safely together and allocating resources to concrete supports and other services that prevent foster care placement.



25% more children and their families are receiving in-home services associated with abuse or neglect from 2014 to 2022.



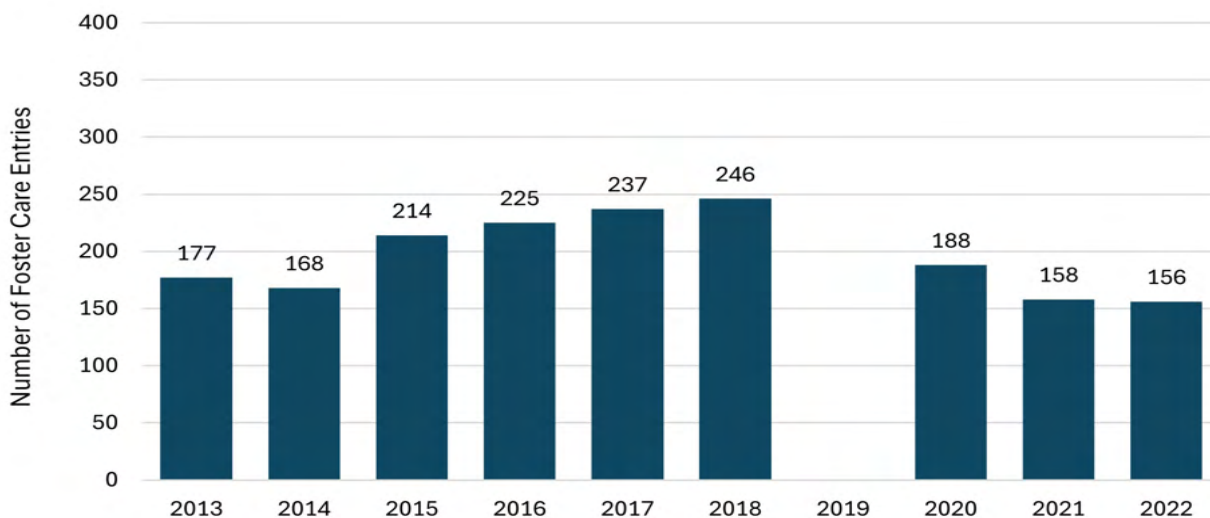
Fewer Children are Removed from their Families

In 2022, total of 401 Montgomery County children were in foster care, a decrease from 448 children in foster care in 2014.¹⁵³ Primary reasons for out-of-home placement in Montgomery County include parental inability or failure to meet children’s needs, parental substance use, and mental health.

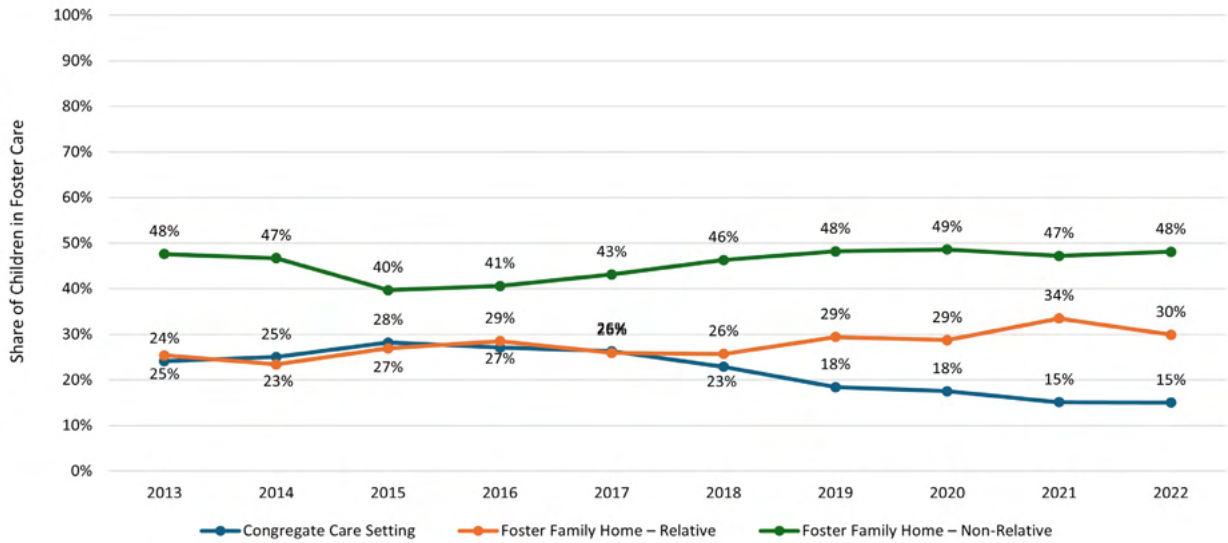
When children cannot be safely maintained in their homes, the priority is to place them with a relative before sending them to a licensed foster home. When children cannot be safe at home, the priority is to place them with a relative before sending them to a licensed foster home. However, almost half of children in foster care in Montgomery County are in non-relative placements.¹⁵⁴ Racial disproportionality continues to pervade the system in Montgomery County, with Black children representing 30% of the total foster care population but just 10% of the total child population. This overrepresentation exists not just locally, but across the Commonwealth and nationally.

Across the country and the state fewer children are being removed from their homes. This shift is a result of federal policy changes embodied in the Family First Prevention Services Act of 2019, which provides federal reimbursement to states and jurisdictions for prevention and support services. The adoption of the federal policy change has taken hold in Montgomery County, where the number of children removed from their homes decreased by over a third, from a high of 246 in 2018 to 156 children in 2022.¹⁵⁵ The county child welfare agency has made efforts to prevent children from entering foster care, utilizing temporary safety plans with alternate caregivers when possible.

County Measures to Support Children Keep Foster Care Cases Low ¹⁵⁶



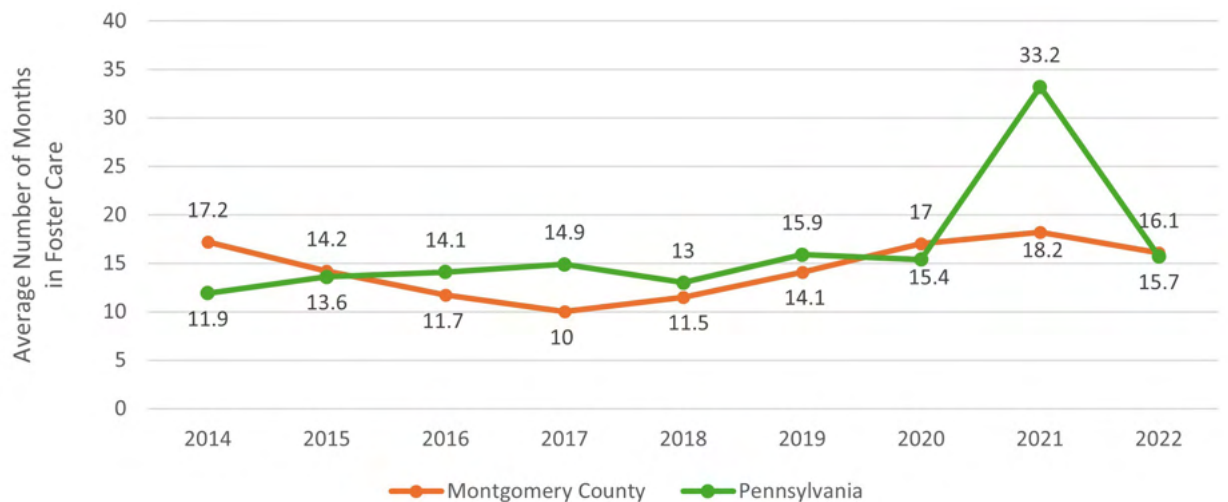
Montgomery County Keeps 85% of Foster Children Out of Congregate Care. Most Children Needing Foster Care Placements are with Non-Relative Foster Parents ¹⁵⁷



Informal 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 foster care subsidy payments, if they were a part of the formal system.

On Average, Montgomery County Children Spend Over a Year in Foster Care ¹⁵⁸



Real Challenges to Permanency for Some Foster Children

Foster care is meant to be a temporary arrangement for children while their families work to address safety and risk factors in the home. But not all children are fortunate to return to their parents or find a “forever home.” There are young people who “age out,” meaning they turn 21 years old and must leave the system and fend for themselves without the caring safety net of a permanent home. Sadly, these young adults are more likely to have long-term education, housing, employment, and mental health challenges than those with stable long-term caregivers.^{159,160}

The percentage of foster youth in Montgomery County who aged out increased from 10% in 2021 to 17% in 2022, while discharges to permanent arrangements (reunification, adoption, or guardianship) decreased slightly from 86% in 2021 to 81% in 2022.¹⁶¹ Though the average length of stay spiked in 2021 (likely due to court delays and extended foster care provisions during the pandemic), children in Montgomery County are more recently remaining in out-of-home care for an average of 15.7 months, slightly less than the statewide average.

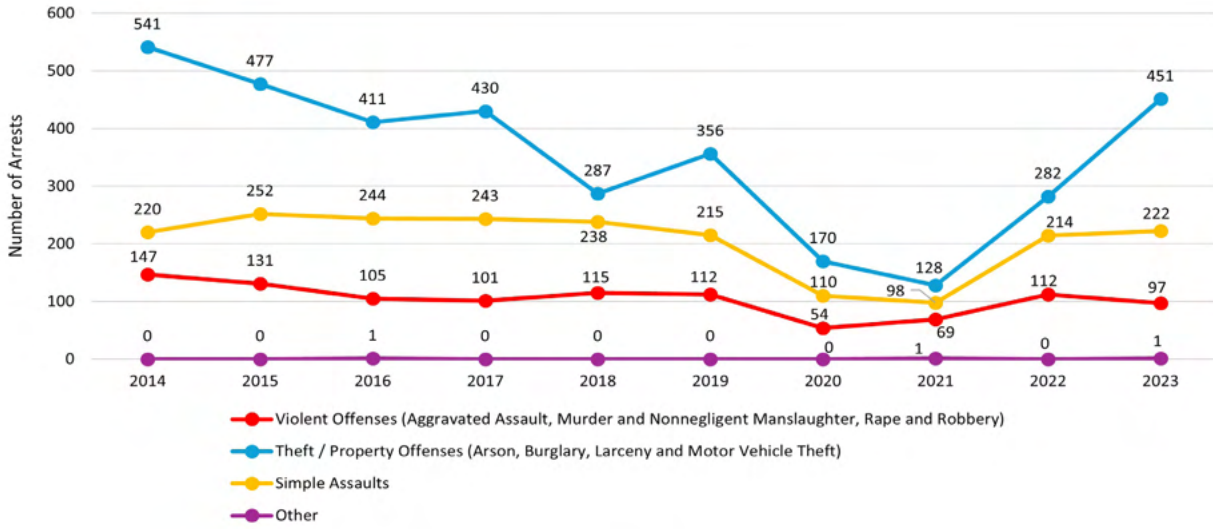
These changes may be associated with the low rate of entry into care, i.e., the children and families in the formal foster care system may have more complex needs that require additional time and effort prior to achieving permanency. It could also be associated with staffing constraints reported across the sector, as well as a lack of adequate mental health and substance abuse services in the community.

Juvenile Justice

When children and teens have their needs met in their communities, they are less likely to be involved in the legal system.¹⁶² But when young people make mistakes and break the law, locking them up in juvenile institutions is rarely the best course of action.^{163,164}

Children and teens who are locked up have poorer 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.¹⁶¹ They are also separated from their families and their communities and do not have opportunities to learn from their mistakes and make amends to the people they hurt. Children locked up are also extremely vulnerable to physical, mental, emotional, and sexual abuse by facility staff.

Youth Crime in Montgomery County Decreased for Most of the Past Decade, but Recently is on the Rise Again¹⁶⁶

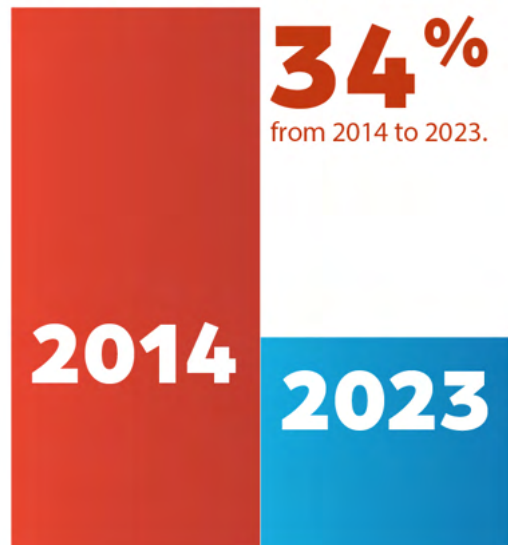


Youth crime, arrests, and incarceration in Montgomery County and across Pennsylvania have declined over the past decade. Following the COVID pandemic, there was an increase in youth arrests, with arrests for property crimes increasing the most significantly – up 60% from 2022 to 2023; but violent offenses decreased 13% between 2022 and 2023, and simple assaults (e.g., school fights) inched up by just 3% in the same period.¹⁶⁷

While income data is currently unavailable for youth in the juvenile justice system, the uptick in 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 youth activities.

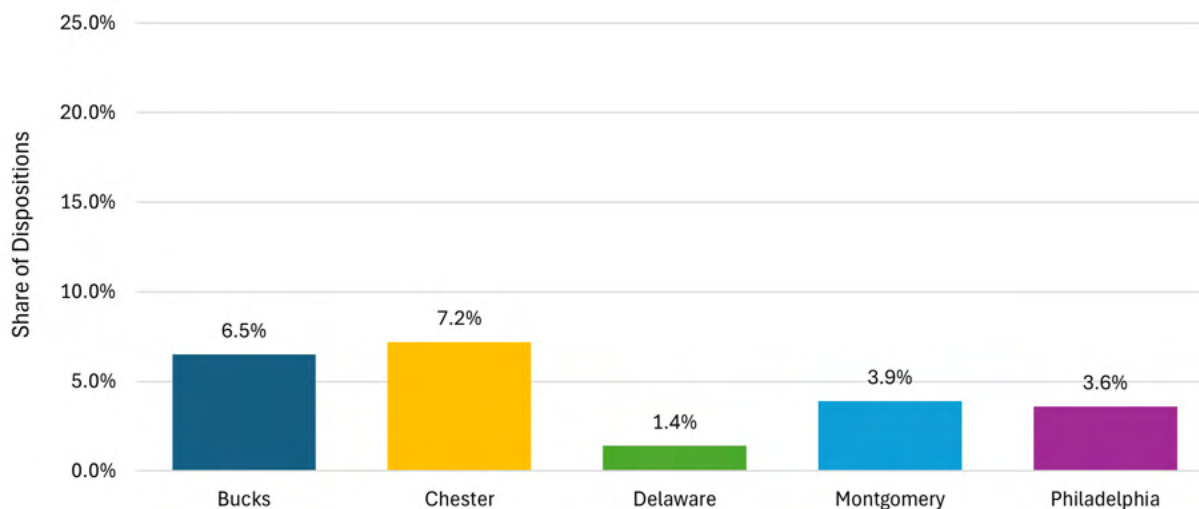
Montgomery County held a total of 210 youth in secure detention (detention is intended to be short-term and is utilized when the court determines a young person cannot remain home while awaiting juvenile court processes), the third highest of the southeastern Pennsylvania counties.¹⁶¹ Montgomery County also had the third highest share of placement dispositions at 4% (placement is a long-term out-of-home program, and disposition is the outcome after the court finds that a youth has committed an offense).

Violent crime caused by children in Montgomery County dropped by



There were 783 total delinquency dispositions, and a total of 46 facility placements of Montgomery County youth.¹⁶⁹ Youth not sent to placement were transferred to another court (e.g., dependency), had their cases dismissed or withdrawn, or received less restrictive interventions like probation.

Montgomery County has the Third Highest Share of Long-Term Juvenile Justice Placements in the Region ¹⁷⁰



Diversion is an effective approach to addressing low-level criminal or delinquent behavior outside the formal court system. In Montgomery County, the District Attorney's Office Youth Aid Panel (YAP) trains community volunteers to meet with youth and assign education, restitution, or community service instead of prosecuting them in court. The program also includes supportive services to help young people and their families. In 2023, Montgomery County diverted just over two-thirds of new allegation dispositions.¹⁷¹ The YAP served 700 youth, and 87% of them completed the program successfully.

Despite this progress, racial disproportionality is egregious in the juvenile justice system in Montgomery County and across the state. In Montgomery County, Black youth represent most delinquency dispositions (58%) and detention admissions (68%), despite comprising just 10% of the county youth population.¹⁷² Montgomery County is one of seven Pennsylvania counties participating in a Georgetown University program focused on reducing racial disparities in the juvenile justice system. The County's project focused on reducing system involvement for school-based offenses by implementing the successful YAP model in three school districts, all of which had been identified as having higher rates of arrest for Black youth. The panels launched during the 2022-2023 school year.¹⁷³

Local and County Recommendations: Montgomery County

In Early Childhood Education, Montgomery County must:

- Utilize county-level funds, in partnership with philanthropic organizations, to recruit and retain the early childhood workforce. Montgomery County led the way when it invested \$4 million in the Childcare Operation Recovery Grant Program, which provides operational grants to licensed child care programs. Similarly, York County's 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. Montgomery County should continue to invest in its early childhood workforce through grants to local ECE providers.
- Partner with philanthropies 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, provides forgivable loans ranging from \$10,000 to \$40,000 to early childhood start-up businesses.

To Improve K-12 Public Education Outcomes, Montgomery 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: Montgomery County

For Improved Child Health Outcomes, Montgomery County must:

- Prioritize maintaining and communicating the Vaccines for Children (VFC) Program, which ensures equitable access to life-saving vaccines for children in need.¹⁷⁴
- 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, Montgomery County must:

- Continue and expand as 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.
- 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, Montgomery 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, Montgomery County must:

- Invest in high school and community college career relate learning programs that increase share of individuals with postsecondary 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, thereby 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 up to make 200% of the federal poverty line (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.¹⁷⁵
- Fully reimburse early childhood care 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.
- 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.
- 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 Pennsylvania 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 these 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 high-vacancy schools.
- 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 prepare 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 5,901 uninsured children in Montgomery 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 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/montcoendnotes2025

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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Children First
990 Spring Garden Street
Suite 600
Philadelphia, PA 19123
215-563-5848