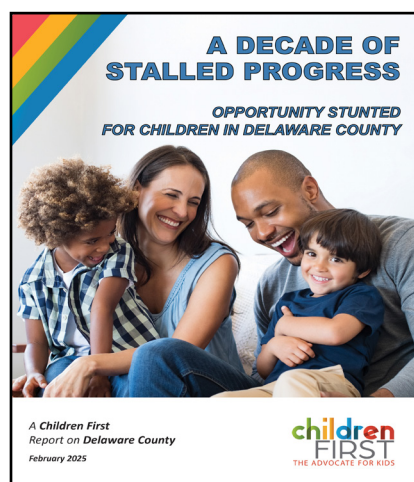


A Decade of Stalled Progress



Almost 285,000 children in southeastern PA live in families who are barely getting by without going into debt or living without the essentials. That's enough to fill Citizens Ball Park six times over and still have thousands waiting outside.

The latest Children First report series, **A Decade**

of Stalled Progress, details the status of children in each of the five southeastern counties, making it clear that opportunities for children and teens in the Philadelphia region are as bad, or in some cases worse, as they were ten years ago. Inflation has taken a big bite out of families with the lowest earnings, leaving them with less spending power than a decade ago.

By continuing to short-change or even cut resources for critical institutions that families rely on – child care, public education, child health and welfare – lawmakers are harming the prospects of children and making a parent's most important job of raising their children harder.

"When we looked at these issues in 2022, it was clear that children were struggling to rebound from COVID. We were hopeful that, when we looked at more recent data we would see more progress," said Executive Director Donna Cooper. "Compared to 2013, sadly the needle has not moved."

The tragic highlights include

- More than half of young children eligible for subsidized child care are locked out of high-quality early learning programs because of the shortage of funds.
- 52,000 children in southeastern PA have lost their Medicaid health care coverage since the end of the pandemic.
- More than a third of teens report being sad, depressed, or anxious most days of the week.
- Less than 10% of students can attend technical high schools that prepare them for a good job upon graduation.
- The state owes school districts across the region \$1.5 billion, stifling education opportunity for students.

The common thread among the five counties was a need for state investment in children AND the adoption of family friendly policies that reward working parents, including tax credits that boost their income and a guarantee of paid family and medical leave to care for a newborn or sick family member.

Quite simply, progress for Pennsylvania children and teens is stalled. State and local leaders must act so kids are back on the road to success.

A Decade of Stalled Progress reports can be found at: www.childrenfirstpa.org/2025countyreports. Email info@childrenfirstpa.org to arrange a presentation of the report data for your business or organization.

Top Priorities for 2025

We have an ambitious policy agenda this year that will transform the lives of children and families as they continue to face unprecedented challenges in their daily lives.

1. **Increase access to health care for the 147,000 children in Pennsylvania who don't have health insurance so they can grow up to be happy in life, successful in school, and ready for the workforce.**
2. **Pass Paid Family and Medical Leave for working parents to have more bonding time with a newborn, recover from a serious illness, or care for a seriously ill loved one in accordance with FMLA.**
3. **Improve education for every student in Pennsylvania by boosting funds for low-wealth public schools.**
4. **Give more students access to Career and Technical Education that give them a chance to learn real world skills before graduating.**
5. **Build up the supply of high-quality child care for working parents with a \$55 million recruitment and retention fund to keep and hire more early childhood teachers.**
6. **Expand access to mental health care for children and youth, improve the circumstances that contribute to behavioral health problems, and eliminate barriers that impede children from accessing the services they need.**
7. **Keep young people out of juvenile detention and institutions and increase diversion programs so that their life chances are not derailed.**
8. **Protect more children from lead-paint poisoning that causes deficits in motor skills, speech, hearing, and cognitive ability, and drains communities' resources with avoidable costs.**



Advocacy in Action

Fix These Six Federal Child-Harming Policies: A Message from Donna Cooper, Executive Director of Children First

Since President Trump took office, decades of great federal programs that made children healthier, safer, and better prepared for adulthood are being thrown out like bath water. While there's a long list of very harmful new federal policies aimed at children, here's our top six to fix.

1. Gutting \$400 million in grants to help abused and exploited children. These funds supported local police investigations of internet-based child exploitation and police training on how to sensitively interview child abuse victims.
2. Abruptly closing half of the regional Head Start offices. Without regional offices offering support to local programs, children and their parents won't have the benefit of the full breadth of high-quality services proven to boost school and adult success.
3. Firing every person working at the CDC's Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program and withholding funds from county efforts to remove lead toxins. Children in Milwaukee are already the first casualties. Widespread lead contamination recently forced seven elementary schools to close, and the federal experts to help in situations just like this are all gone.
4. Denying legal representation to the nearly 26,000 children affected by immigration enforcement actions. When children are torn from their families and sent to detention centers while their parents

are deported or jailed for alleged immigration violations, there's now no funding for legal representation for kids affected by the immigration enforcement actions.

5. Slashing a billion dollars that funded school-based mental health services. Despite alarming rates of teen depression and suicide, the U.S. Department of Education falsely claimed the funding violated students' civil rights and cut the funding.
6. Kicking parents off Medicaid. To help offset the costs of \$4 billion in tax cuts, Trump intends to force 8.6 million Americans – MANY OF THEM SINGLE MOTHERS – off Medicaid. When parents lose coverage, child health is at risk.



Children First went to Washington to make the case for Head Start. We've raised the alarm about the danger of lead poisoning and the need to reverse the cuts. We lead the effort to send an impassioned statement to the President and Congress to reverse the cuts to mental health services for children. Every day we are working with health care institutions and advocates to stop the harsh consequences of the Medicaid proposals.

You can do your part too by signing up for or participating in our Take Action campaigns that arrive in your inboxes on Tuesdays. If you are not already signed up, do so today at www.childrenfirstpa.org.

Policy Priorities

Strong Minds, Bright Futures: A Partnership for Child Mental Wellbeing

When the world shut down during COVID, many people supposed that the childhood mental health crisis was a result of social isolation and loss of family or friends. To be sure, the difficult conditions triggered a spike in children feeling depressed, but mental health challenges among young people didn't start with COVID. Well before the pandemic, 30% of Pennsylvania teens reported being sad or depressed most days; ten years later, that percentage rose a few points to 34%.

At The Big Thing, the 2022 Children First community convening, families, educators, health professionals, and youth sounded the alarm about youth mental health. In response, Children First took the lead in launching a powerful statewide partnership, Strong Minds, Bright Futures: A Partnership for Child Mental Wellbeing.

This partnership is mobilizing the political will to remove barriers to giving children access to mental health services. One of the chief barriers is outdated state policies that limit access to mental health care to when children are in crisis rather than ensuring early access to care is

easy to access so that children never develop chronic mental health conditions. By uniting educators, health providers, parents, youth, and mental health experts we are working to get a more prevention focused mental health system in place that is backed by financially sustainable policies and strategies.

**Strong Minds,
Bright Futures**

A Partnership for Child
Mental Wellbeing

Launched in April, the partnership is off to a strong start with 60 founding partners across 30 counties under the leadership of dynamic co-chairs, Tina Clymer, Carbon-Monroe-Mike Counties Mental Health and Developmental Services Administrator, and Marcus Allen, CEO of Big Brothers Big Sisters.

Strong Minds, Bright Futures is committed to ensuring that every child in Pennsylvania has access to mental health resources that foster long-term success—today and into the future.

To learn more and get involved, visit www.strongminds-pa.org or email info@strongmindspa.org.

Advocacy in Action

Dateline Harrisburg: Finish The Job

Education advocates – like you – won the legal battle but our fight for fair funding will continue until every child has access to a first-rate education that prepares them for a 21st century career. Governor Shapiro expressed his agreement when he accepted our 2025 Champion for Children award. “Last year, when I signed my budget into law, for the first time in Pennsylvania history, we invested over \$11 billion into public education – \$ 2 billion more than before I took office. We are addressing the mandate from the courts and we’ve got to keep this going. We are by no means done.” Shapiro has proposed the next installment of education funding to fill the existing \$4 billion gap in what districts are owed by the state. His budget proposal includes \$1.8 billion in additional funding, more than \$870 million going to the 387 rural, suburban, and urban schools that have long been underfunded and that educate most of the state’s Black, Hispanic, and low-income students.



With budget negotiations in full swing in Harrisburg, Children First was among the advocates, students, parents, and educators who held a rowdy and rainy rally to keep the pressure on lawmakers to finish the job and fund our schools. You can do your part by emailing your state lawmakers as negotiations progress. [Sign up for our emails at www.childrenfirstpa.org](http://www.childrenfirstpa.org) so you can take action.

Dateline Washington DC: Don't Stop Head Start

When the Trump Administration and Congressional leaders floated the notion of cutting Head Start, the national response was fast and furious. Flexing their advocacy power, thousands of Pennsylvanians joined millions of Americans in protesting cuts to early learning for kids living in poverty. When the U.S. House passed its budget in late May, Head Start was spared the chopping block. But steps to undermine the program are already underway. Elon Musk's DOGE shut down five of the 10 regional Head Start offices nationwide that are responsible for making sure that providers get paid, and that programs are safe and nurturing.



Children First and close to 100 Head Start parents, children, alumni, providers, and supporters took their personal time to travel to D.C. to tell lawmakers to lead the charge for greater investment in Head Start. “It's not enough just to protect the status quo,” said Zaina Cahill, Children First Director of Early Childhood Education Policy. “Head Start has never been fully funded and we need Congress to reinstate the regional offices and make a greater investment in children.”

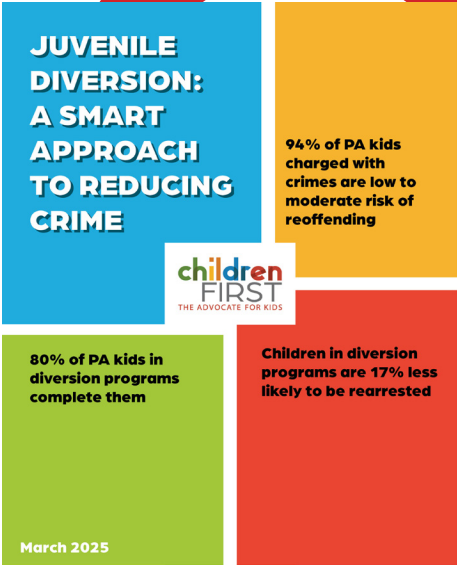
Reducing Youth Crime

When young people who break the law are sentenced to detention centers, we are failing them and their communities. Nearly every Pennsylvania child (94%) charged with crimes are at low to moderate risk of reoffending but jailing them treats them like hardened criminals.

New Children First research shows that locking children up contributes to higher juvenile and adult crime rates and is exorbitantly expensive. In fact, no research shows that putting children in detention improves community safety. Proven strategies that reduce recidivism and cost much less are diversion programs that provide support for youth to both repay a debt to society and gain rehabilitation and stability skills.

These programs provide children with the chance to learn from their mistakes and make amends and decrease the chance they will commit more crime. More than 80% of kids who have the option of entering a diversion program complete it and many don't have further involvement with the legal system.

Every Pennsylvania county offers some degree of diversion, but there are differences in models and approaches. For example, a child found guilty of shoplifting in one county might be incarcerated while another county might refer the child to a diversion program. Our new report, *Juvenile Diversion: A Smart Approach to Reducing Crime*, details successful programs, what county governments can do to expand reforms, and what the state can do to standardize the use of these proven models across the state. [Join the Youth Safety Coalition as we continue this important work. Contact Stefanie Arbutina at stefaniea@childrenfirstpa.org.](http://www.childrenfirstpa.org)



Celebrating 45 Years



In 1980, a group of determined citizen advocates formed a small but mighty Philadelphia-based nonprofit to protect children from substantial cuts to kids’ programs under then-Mayor Rizzo. Since then, Children First has grown in size and strength, but our core mission remains unchanged: getting lawmakers to provide the resources every child needs to be happy and healthy.

Our 45 years of work on behalf of children and teens is receiving notable recognition. Philadelphia City Council declared March 20, 2025 “Children First Day” in the city. And Governor Shapiro, our Champion for Children honoree this year, sang our praises. “To receive an award like this from Children First, who’ve been doing this work for 45 years, tireless advocates on behalf of children, this means a great deal to me.” Our more than four decades of success is a result of the continued support from donors, citizen advocates, parent and student advisors, coalition partners, and volunteer leaders who tirelessly stand by us. [Take stock of what we’ve achieved together – check out our history website at \[www.pccyhistory.org\]\(http://www.pccyhistory.org\).](#)

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For more than 20 years, Valerie Hamilton’s personal mission has been to help young people learn and succeed. She founded Children of God Educational Services, located in Bristol Borough, “to coach and encourage even the most underachieving students to believe in themselves and their ability to learn.” Their

high-quality pre-k and afterschool programs nurture children from pre-kindergarten through eighth grade and allow their parents to go to work.

When COVID sent the child care sector into a tailspin, Valerie teamed up with Children First to advocate for help from Pennsylvania’s leaders and she continues to be a very active partner. She also actively contributes to Children First as a long-time sponsor of our annual Champion for Children celebration. “You need to support the things that support you,” she said. “Children First has helped me be the voice for those who don’t have one, and I deeply appreciate that.” [Be like Valerie and support our work. Contact Caroline King at \[carolinek@childrenfirstpa.org\]\(mailto:carolinek@childrenfirstpa.org\) or 215-680-0077.](#)