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NEW REPORT: Ohio's Appalachian Region Facing Increased Barriers to Child Well-Being; Barriers Increased by COVID-19

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COLUMBUS, Ohio—Today, Children's Defense Fund-Ohio (CDF-Ohio) released, [*Children and Families in Ohio's Appalachian Region: 2020 Data and Issue Brief*](#), a new report that provides a snapshot of pre-COVID-19 issues facing Ohio's 32-county Appalachian region. The report examines indicators of child well-being in the areas of: economic well-being, health, education, and families and communities.

"For nearly 20 years, CDF-Ohio has been committed to elevating the voices of children and families in Ohio's Appalachian region," said Tracy Nájera, executive director of Children's Defense Fund-Ohio. "This report is designed to provide practical data and actionable recommendations to enable our policy leaders, philanthropic organizations, and others to highlight need and drive decision-making."

COVID-19 Contributing to Growing Disparities

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified disparities in Ohio's Appalachian region, particularly in the areas of health care, housing, nutrition, early care and education, child welfare, and K–12 education. In addition to the *2020 Data and Issue Brief*, CDF-Ohio has also developed [*Ohio's Response to COVID-19: Recommendations and Next Steps*](#), which highlights the impact of the pandemic on Ohio's Appalachian region and what is needed to make sure that Ohio is not creating disparities around access to health, education, and economic opportunity based on where a person lives.

"There's no question that all Ohioans have been impacted by the pandemic; however, the existing barriers to health care, broadband, unemployment, housing, and more, put Ohio's Appalachian region at greater risk of lagging behind," said Dean Randy Leite of Ohio University's College of Health Sciences and Professions.

"The data presented in this brief highlight the situation in our region," said Dr. Barbara Hansen, Director of the Appalachia Ohio PreK-20 Council and is a professor of education at Muskingum University. "The challenges are often barriers to opportunities that children either overcome or are overcome by. However, we are seeing best practices that are making a difference and provide hope for Appalachian children to grow and flourish."

According to Jenny Stotts, "Many adults are point to a smart-phone and say to their kids, "look, you have the world at your fingertips." But for approximately one in three kids in Appalachia, this is not the case. Ensuring access to broadband internet must be a cornerstone of any COVID-19 response across the state, and specifically within Appalachian Ohio. When children cannot access the internet, their entire



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life is impacted -- not only are they unable to complete their school work, but they miss out on social connections with friends, on opportunities for tele-health, and a chance to continuously engage with the rest of the world outside of their community.

Knowing that sustainable change must be rooted in the region, it was critical for CDF-Ohio to collaborate with partners who live and work in the region and who care deeply about children and the region's future. Funding for this research and report were generously provided by Muskingum University and Ohio University's College of Health Sciences and Professions.

Key Findings

- Of the health care challenges in Appalachia, **access to basic health care is a recurring theme**. Many rural and Appalachian residents often travel further distances to access primary care and the cost of health care services appears to be higher in Appalachian counties compared to the rest of the state.
- **Poverty creates significant hardships on families and can have lasting effects on children**. The 11 counties with the highest poverty rates in Ohio (over 20%) were all in the Appalachian region, and a higher proportion of children in Appalachia (23.3%) are living in poverty compared to the rest of the state (19.8%). Additionally, over 3,000 children and their families are homeless in the region.
- **Kinship care in Ohio has increased by nearly 140% from 2010 to 2018**. Of the counties with the highest percentages of children who are cared for by grandparents, eight are in Appalachia.
- High-quality child care is critical to child development and essential to parents' ability to seek employment and work. Unfortunately, the **lack of high-quality child care in the region remains a challenge**.
- Other health and well-being factors that contribute to the region's challenges, include the **opioid crisis, suicide rates (19% higher than the national average), infant mortality (21% higher than the national average), and lead exposure (7 of the top 10 Ohio counties at highest risk of lead exposure are in Appalachia)**.

Nájera adds that while the report brings awareness to the region's current challenges and promising practices, it also demonstrates how the equity gap continues to grow in the region. "What we're seeing is a picture of two Ohio's—we cannot allow opportunity gaps to persist," she explains.

[Read full report](#)

[Watch the recording our virtual press conference for this report's release featuring an expert panel from the region, July 28, 2020](#)

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About Children's Defense Fund-Ohio

The Children's Defense Fund Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities.



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