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Are Orange County's kids really all right?

Column: Much is better, but disparities yawn, according to data-heavy glimpse at childhood



Students head to class after returning from summer break at Anaheim High School in Anaheim, CA on Wednesday, August 10, 2022. The high school dropout rate hit a 10-year low, while college readiness hit a 10-year high in Orange County. (Photo by Paul Bersebach, Orange County Register/SCNG)

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As I hang the lights and trim the tree and plan the holiday festivities, this weighs heavily on me.

Here in Orange County, one of the wealthiest in America, nearly 13 of every 100 kids lives in poverty. And that's by the most kind, gentle standard, which doesn't factor in California's crazy cost of living. Once you do *that*, nearly *one-quarter* of Orange County's kids live in poverty.

These are just some of the gut-punch data points from the 28th Annual Report on the Conditions of Children in Orange County — and, stunningly (and perhaps a bit shamefully, as I grew up Catholic), they show marked *improvement*. Child poverty has actually *dropped* 39% here since hitting a high in 2013, by the kinder, gentler federal standard.

Childhood, Helen Hayes once said, is a short season. And it's clearly much shorter for some than for others.

"The implications for children living in poverty include greater risk for poor academic achievement, school dropout, abuse and neglect, behavioral and social/emotional problems, physical health problems and developmental delays," the report said.

"(L)iving in poverty exacerbates mental health and substance use issues, which together account for almost 60% of the child welfare cases filed in Orange County."

Ouch. Things are direr in the poorest parts of the county. But officials are accentuating the positive, and there is much improvement in many areas, so let's do that without letting ourselves off the hook.

Good news

- The high school dropout rate hit a 10-year low, while college readiness hit a 10-year high. We're talking 8.9% in 2012, and just 4% in 2021. And more of them were UC/CSU eligible: 57% in 2021 vs. 52% in 2012.
- Many more kids had health insurance, which means they're more likely to get timely care, prescription medications, immunizations, dental care and vision screenings – and, overall, have better health outcomes. There were nearly 54,000 uninsured kids in 2014; that plummeted by more than half, to just more than 24,000, in 2020. (That's great! But – 24,000 kids still without health insurance?!)
 - Arrests of kids were way down. In 2011, there were 10,801 juveniles arrested; in 2020, there were 2,053. That's a drop of more than 80%. (Please remember this when politicians howl about These Dangerous Lost Youth.)
 - Gang-specific crime has eased up as well. Between 2012 and 2021, the total number of juvenile gang-related prosecutions in Orange County plunged from 484 to 69.
 - While births to teenagers increased slightly between 2019 and 2020, they're historically quite low. In 2011, teenagers delivered 2,249 babies; in 2020, they delivered just 698 babies. It's even more dramatic when viewed this way: The rate was 19.6 births per 1,000 females aged 15-19 in 2011, and just 6.9 in 2020.
 - More kids have the vaccinations they need to stay healthy. In 2021, more than 96% of Orange County kindergartners had up-to-date immunizations, compared to just 88.7% in 2013.
 - Infant mortality is down. In 2020, the rate was 2.8 deaths per 1,000 births. In 2011, it was 4.2.

But these positive outcomes are not achieved by all, the report noted. There are glaring disparities along socio-economic and racial/ethnic lines – “revealing both the progress being made and struggles experienced among children and youth.”



Tacos with fruit and vegetable sides from the Segerstrom High School cafeteria in Santa Ana. This school year, California will be the first to embrace a statewide “Universal Meals Program” for all school children, regardless of need. (Photo by NICK AGRO, ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER/SCNG)

Not-so-good news

Kids are dying.

Orange County’s “unintentional injury death rate” — accidental poisoning, car accidents, drowning — increased nearly 32% (from 4.7 per 100,000 children in 2011 to 6.2 per 100,000 children in 2020).

Unintentional poisonings — read, fentanyl overdoses — accounted for 19% of deaths in 2020, compared to just 3.8% in 2019.

Other sobering stats:

- Substantiated child abuse reports are down — but it's just wrong to put that in a "good news" section. In 2021, 25,860 children were the subject of one or more child abuse allegations in Orange County. Of those, 17.7% (4,572) of abuse reports were substantiated. That's a rate of 6.5 per 1,000 kids, down from 7.9 in 2012. Which is better for sure, but not good. Victims of child abuse are more likely to use drugs and alcohol, become homeless as adults, engage in violence against others and be incarcerated.
- On health insurance, Latino kids continue to have higher uninsured rates (5.2%) than other racial/ethnic groups, such as Asian (3.2%), White (3.1%) and "other" (1.3%). And geographic disparity continues: The communities with the highest percentages of uninsured kids were Los Alamitos (8.3%), Costa Mesa (5.6%) and Laguna Hills (5.4%). Those with the lowest percentages of uninsured kids were Las Flores (0%), Seal Beach (0.2%) and North Tustin (0.7%).
- Despite the overall declines in infant mortality, mortality rates per 1,000 live births were highest among Latino (3.7) infants, followed by White (2.3) and Asian/Pacific Islander (1.0) infants.
- Low birth-weight babies comprised 6.2% of births in 2020, and very low birth-weight babies accounted for nearly 1% of births. But this varied widely by group: Black babies had the highest rate of low birth weight (9.8%), followed by Asian/Pacific Islander (6.7%), Latino (6.6%) and White (5.0%) infants.
- On the childhood vaccination front, Savanna School District had the lowest percentage of kindergartners with up-to-date shots (91.4%), followed by Capistrano (93.2%). The district with the most-vaccinated kindergartners was Los Alamitos at 99.4%.
- On the school readiness front, only slightly more than half of kids were developmentally ready for kindergarten in 2022 (52.5%), a slight drop from 2019 (52.9%). They were most ready, of course, in the more affluent communities (Laguna Beach, 78.3%, Ladera Ranch at 78.1%, Irvine, 66.1%, La Palma, 64.9%), while they were least ready in less affluent communities (Santa Ana, 40.6%, La Habra, 42.7%, Stanton, 42.7%).

Nearly 1 in 5 O.C. neighborhoods had high levels of family financial instability, and they were clustered in the north-central part of Orange County, but also reached to portions of the coast and south county, the report said.

There's not enough quality childcare. There's too much homelessness.

"Orange County's children have gone through a great deal as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic," said Orange County Board of Supervisors Chairman Doug Chaffee, chair of the Orange County Children's Partnership which published the report, in a letter prefacing its findings.

"In many ways, their lives have been turned upside down, with substantial disruptions at both home and school. They have experienced remote learning and social isolation. Many families have had economic hardship and new or worsened work and family stressors ... we know that low economic status is statistically linked to poorer outcomes across a multitude of domains.

"As Chair of the Orange County Children's Partnership, I am confident that we can continue to build the community assets that support and strengthen children's resilience – including in communities where economic hardship is widespread – and use this report to help all children, youth, and families thrive."

Officials and schools have numerous initiatives to try to address these issues — but all of us can do something to make things better for the most vulnerable kids in our midst. I hope you reach out and find ways to brighten little lives this holiday season. A turkey dinner? New toys? Snappy clothes? Every little bit helps.

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Teri Sforza is one of the lead reporters on the OCR/SCNG probe of fraud, abuse and death in the Southern California addiction treatment industry. Our "Rehab Riviera" coverage won first place for investigative reporting from the California Newspaper Publishers Association, first place for projects reporting from Best of the West and is a finalist for the National Institute for Health Care Management Foundation's print award, competing with the New York Times, the Washington Post and ProPublica. Sforza birthed the Watchdog column for The Orange County Register in 2008, aiming to keep a critical (but good-humored) eye on governments and nonprofits, large and small. It won first place for public service reporting from the California Newspaper Publishers Association in 2010. She also contributed to the OCR's Pulitzer Prize-winning

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