

Data in Action

Strategies for improving overall child well-being

One of the best ways to help children reach their potential is to invest in their families and the communities that they are growing up in. These policy recommendations are informed by data and identified as winning strategies for improving well-being in the areas of family and community, economic security, education, and health and safety.

Family and Community

Provide comprehensive health education

The number of births to teens aged 15-19 are less than half of what they were a decade ago. While Michigan does not have a standard sexual education curriculum or require it to be taught in schools, the teens in our focus groups emphasized the importance of a curriculum that is inclusive of all gender identities and sexual orientations.

RECOMMENDATION: A comprehensive health education can have positive impacts on long-term health outcomes. All youth should have access to a comprehensive and inclusive sexual health education.

Address the digital divide

Both rural and urban communities alike have low rates of access to high-speed internet, and at least 10% of all Michigan households didn't have home internet access in 2019. Lower-income earners are even less likely to have high-speed internet and are more reliant on using smartphones to access the internet for tasks that are designed for larger screens, like homework.

WIN & RECOMMENDATION: Gov. Gretchen Whitmer announced an initiative to increase high-speed internet in fall 2020, and federal COVID recovery plans include new investments for state broadband infrastructure. All efforts to expand connectivity should include a focus on affordability, encourage community-owned options and include investments in existing resources like public libraries.

Invest in child neglect and abuse prevention

In 2020, 205,631 minors were in families where allegations of child neglect or abuse occurred. After an investigation, 14% of those claims (27,894) were found to be substantiated. In 2020, 10,023 youth were in out-of-home care.

WIN: The federal Family First Prevention Services Act, passed in 2018, increased resources available for foster care prevention services and to keep more kids with their family while reducing funding for group placements that are clinically unnecessary.

Support youth transitioning out of foster care

Over 10,000 youth were in foster care in 2020, and several thousand exit the system every year. In Michigan, only 5% of youth transitioning out of foster care receive employment assistance, and 1% receive education support.

RECOMMENDATION: Ensure adequate support for programs that assist foster youth exiting the system with education, housing and work.

Reduce financial hardship for justice-involved youth

Michigan's juvenile justice system is decentralized, so experiences for justice-involved youth—like access to support services and assessment of fines and fees—can vary greatly by geographic location. This impacts recidivism, financial security and hardship for youth and young adults.

WIN & RECOMMENDATION: There were a number of criminal justice reforms in 2020, including making it easier to keep juvenile records confidential and to get a juvenile record expunged. To combat the criminalization of poverty, the nonpayment of fines and fees can no longer lead to driver's license suspensions. For similar reasons, juvenile and family court systems should work toward eliminating fines and fees levied on justice-involved youth.

Economic Security

Address income and tax inequality

Michigan is 15th in the nation for income inequality: its top 1% of earners make more than 21 times as much as the bottom 99% of workers. Even still, the bottom 20% of income earners pay nearly double the rate in total state and local taxes than its top 1% of earners (10.4% and 6.2% of income, respectively). Across the state, nearly 40% of Michigan households are struggling to make ends meet.

RECOMMENDATION: Improve job opportunities, working conditions and tax implications by restoring Michigan's Earned Income Tax Credit to 20% of the federal credit, expanding the Homestead Property Tax Credit and implementing a graduated income tax to help Michigan workers keep more of their hard-earned wages.

Meet affordable housing needs

Nearly a quarter (24%) of Michigan's children are in families that pay a disproportionately high amount of their income on housing expenses (30% or more). Even more, the number of kids living in high-poverty areas has increased by 78,000 since 2000. Areas of concentrated poverty impact families' access to healthy food, quality medical care, education, jobs and physical environments free from environmental hazards.

RECOMMENDATION: Michigan's existing Housing and Community Development Fund hasn't received state funding since 2012, and doesn't have resources to meet the state's affordable housing needs. The state should identify a dedicated revenue stream to ensure enough stable funding is available to increase access to safe, affordable housing in opportunity-rich communities for families with low incomes.

Support families in deep poverty

In 2019, 162,000 (8%) of Michigan children lived in deep poverty (50% of the federal poverty level). The Family Independence Program (FIP), or cash assistance, was designed for these families, though eligibility levels are even below this threshold. In 2011, Michigan created a lifetime cap on how long it will provide FIP benefits by eliminating hardship exemptions and "clockstoppers" for those limits. The number of children receiving FIP declined by 83% (over 127,500 cases) from 2010 to 2020.

RECOMMENDATION: Reinstate "clockstoppers" so that months in which a family is meeting program work requirements do not count towards the 48-month lifetime limit, and make use of the federal hardship exemption for families that cannot meet them. In this way, Michigan can reduce extreme poverty for children, especially those in communities with limited job opportunities.



Education

Expand access to early learning

The average annual cost for one infant in a child care center in Michigan is 19% of a median family's income and 54% of a minimum wage worker's income. Because of low initial eligibility thresholds, low provider payments and supply, the number of children ages 0-12 receiving child care subsidies fell from 56,375 (3.4% of kids ages 0-12) in 2010 to 25,246 (1.7% of kids aged 0-12) in 2020.

WIN & RECOMMENDATION: The 2021 state budget increased the initial income eligibility threshold for child care subsidies from 130% to 150% of poverty. Still, pre-COVID, the national median for initial eligibility was 188% of poverty. Michigan's eligibility threshold should be raised to a minimum of 185%, with incremental increases to 250% of poverty. Payments to providers should be increased to reflect the actual cost of care, increasing quality, availability and access for families.



Fund schools based on what students need

Michigan is one of just 16 states that provides less funding to its highest-poverty districts than to its lowest-poverty districts. When schools are not equitably funded, learning environments and student outcomes suffer. The majority of third-graders and eighth-graders are partially or not proficient in reading and math, respectively. The majority of high schoolers graduate on time. However, there are disparities in educational achievement based on race, disability, language and socioeconomic status.

RECOMMENDATION: Schools need adequate resources to create successful learning conditions for students, particularly those with disabilities or language barriers and those who are impacted by poverty. Michigan should adopt a weighted school funding formula to fund schools based on community and student need.

Fund K-12 schools as intended

Though Michigan has steadily increased per-pupil funding, when adjusted for inflation, per-pupil funding actually fell by 9% between 2008-2019. Even more, from 2010-2019, Michigan shifted a total of \$4.5 billion intended for K-12 public schools to universities and community colleges to help balance the state budget.

RECOMMENDATION: Use the money in the state's School Aid Fund solely for K-12 education, as had been done prior to 2009.

Keep students in school

Michigan had the third-highest rate of fourth-grade chronic absenteeism in the country in 2019, an increase of nearly 47% since 2015. Students who are economically disadvantaged and/or homeless are most likely to be chronically absent. Michigan is also one of five states with the highest out-of-school suspension rates.

RECOMMENDATION: Address absenteeism by tackling economic and housing insecurity. In the meantime, ensure attendance programs meet the needs of all students, adopt real-time attendance tracking tools to identify students at risk of chronic absenteeism early on, and put the appropriate support services in place. Address Michigan's high suspension rates and racial disparities in discipline policies and practices.

Health and Safety

Ensure no kid goes hungry

Child food insecurity rates range, by county, from a low of 6.7% to a high of 26.8%; in other words, a child may be four times more likely to be food insecure depending on where they live. The state average is 15%, and Michigan's rural and northern counties have the highest rates of food insecurity.

WIN & RECOMMENDATION: The 10 Cents a Meal program helps schools purchase healthy foods (and support local farmers). Additional funding was secured in 2020 to expand program availability from 43 counties to every county in Michigan. The state should continue to increase funding so kids in every school district and child care center can fully benefit from the program.

WIN & RECOMMENDATION: The lifetime ban on food assistance for residents with certain drug convictions was eliminated in 2020. However, state policy still requires families to cooperate with child support collection if the other parent is not living in the home (or show good cause for not doing so). Michigan should join the vast majority of states and eliminate this requirement for food assistance.

Expand healthcare to reach more kids

Access to health insurance supports better outcomes for children and adults. Health insurance coverage for young people ages 0-18 was at 97% in 2019, one of the highest rates in the nation. Still, 78,000 young people are without health insurance, including children who are lawful permanent residents ("green card" holders).

RECOMMENDATION: Children and pregnant women who are lawful permanent residents ("green card" holders) cannot access public health insurance during a five-year waiting period after arriving in the United States. The state should waive this optional Medicaid/Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) waiting period to expand children's healthcare coverage and support healthy birth outcomes.

Invest in public health insurance options

Children's health insurance coverage is often related to parental coverage. Before COVID-19, 38% of kids were insured by a public health plan. By the end of 2020, 66% of households with children reported lost employment income since the start of the pandemic. As expected, Medicaid and the Healthy Michigan Plan saw an increase in enrollees.

WIN & RECOMMENDATION: To accommodate the growing number of people covered by public insurance, Michigan must continue to invest the necessary state dollars to qualify for federal support and prevent Michigan from scaling back insurance eligibility or benefits.

Support maternal and infant health

The health of newborn babies and mothers is a sign of population health. While Michigan counties experience a range of birth outcomes, the state lags behind the U.S. in many areas.

WIN: In 2020, the Michigan Legislature voted to fund the Healthy Moms Healthy Babies initiative to improve healthcare and health outcomes.

Expand health services in school settings

Michigan statute does not have specific language that allows minors to consent to many basic medical services. This poses unique barriers for unaccompanied youth, foster care youth, homeless youth and the effectiveness of school- and community-based health centers. Access to health services is important, made clear by a year that threatened the physical and mental health of people of all ages.

RECOMMENDATION: Address barriers young people may face in accessing school-based health services, including clear guidelines and the ability to consent to basic health services. To promote and ensure access to mental health supports, the student-to-school-counselor ratio in school settings should be at levels recommended by mental health professionals.