GROWING UP IN HOUSTON

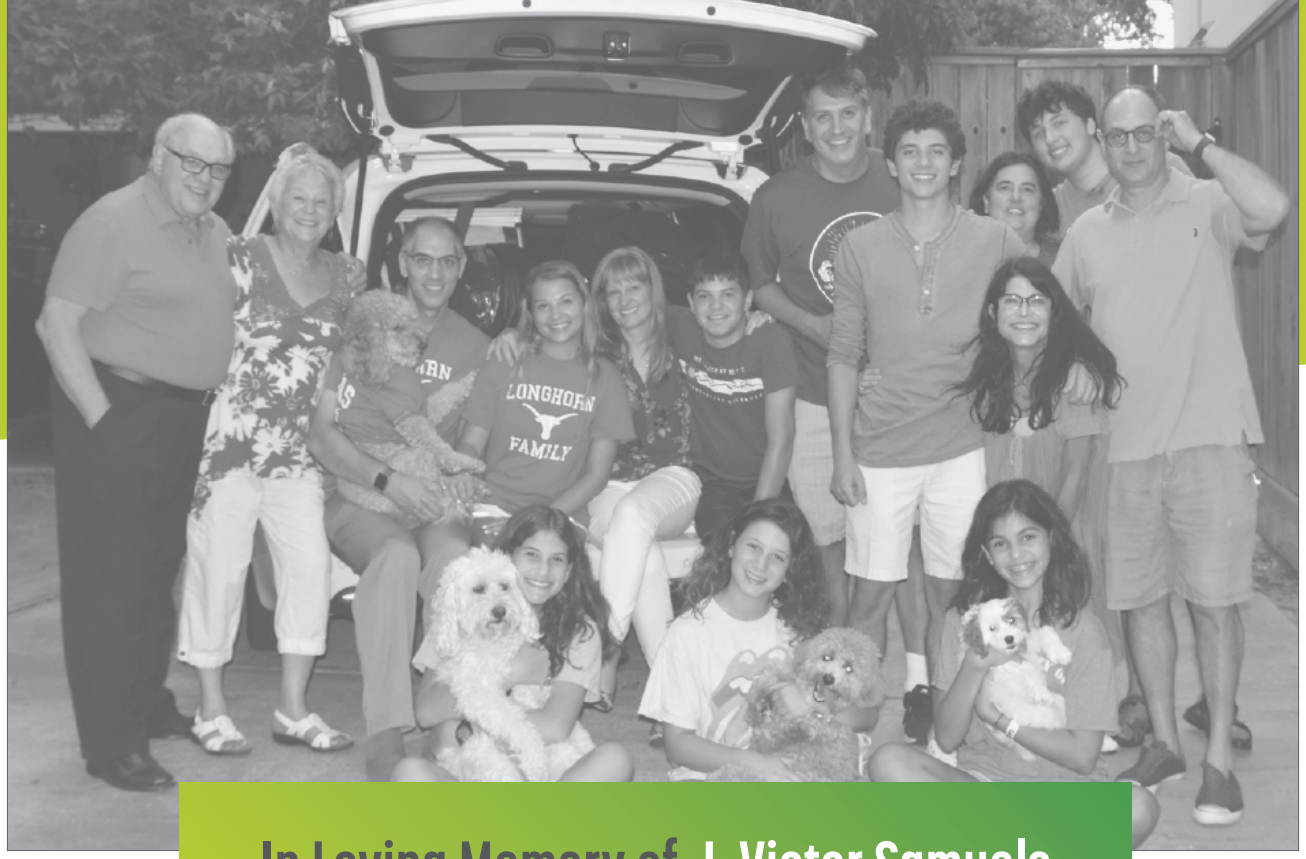
Assessing the Quality of Life of Our Children

children at Risk

JPMorgan Chase & Co.

United Way

United Way of Greater Houston



In Loving Memory of J. Victor Samuels

Vic, your legacy lives within CHILDREN AT RISK'S work.

A loving husband, father, and grandfather.

A hard-working entrepreneur who not only led his business to remarkable success but who with his generosity and partnership helped Houston grow.

A risk taker who famously divided his time evenly between family, business, and community and whose focus was always the wellbeing of those around him and his community.

A philanthropist who rolled up his sleeves with his beloved Bobbi to help do the work and make change happen.

A partner who not only financially supported schools in need but walked school corridors, engaged with children, and lovingly taught history lessons.

A mensch. A Jewish man who lived and raised a family under the commitment of "Tikkun Olam" – the responsibility to repair and make the world a better place.
To Vic, the mentor and leader whose legacy continues to inspire us all and pushes us to be champions for children.

With gratitude and a commitment to our mission,

For children!

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Message from the CEO

WELCOME

THE MORE THINGS CHANGE

Welcome to the new Executive Summary of ***Growing Up In Houston: Assessing the Quality of Life of Our Children*** (GUIH), published by CHILDREN AT RISK (C@R), in partnership with the United Way of Greater Houston, JPMorgan Chase & Co., and our many other partners throughout the years. You will see many changes in this sixteenth edition — but you will see the same consistent reliance on data as the starting point for all conversations about the well-being of children. The goal of the GUIH project is three-fold: to provide stakeholders in our children's future with a tool to help identify the most strategic and pressing areas for intervention; to chart new paths to move Houston forward; and to track progress over time.

Much has changed since our last edition, in no small part due to the impact that COVID-19 has had on everything from schooling to family life. But even prior to COVID-19, we planned to bring GUIH into the digital realm, and this Executive Summary is the first phase of that shift. We sought to simplify the message in this summary and move more of our data online. Phase Two will launch in early 2021 on our website (see https://childrenatrisk.org/GUIH/). In this second phase, much of the GUIH data will be displayed in a user-friendly interactive format that allows users to explore different topics at a variety of levels, drilling down on or taking a bird's eye view of the data of interest. Historical data will be displayed on the website as well.

This report continues C@R's tradition of highlighting the ways that Houston's children excel, despite their lacking quality resources in key areas and facing challenges like hurricanes, flooding, and, most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic brings to the forefront issues that must be addressed, including the digital divide and persistent racial disparities.

Our Executive Summary addresses the whole child, including:

- The Early Childhood Experience
- K-12 Education
- Parenting
- New American Children (NEW this year!)
- Opportunity Youth and Young Adults
- Youth Vulnerability and Safety
- Health and Nutrition

The new format has some new features in each section, including:

- Systemic or Pandemic (examines a phenomenon through the lens of COVID-19)
- Vision for Our Children (a call to action so all children can thrive)

At CHILDREN AT RISK, we believe the needs of children should be our society's highest priority. Our hope is that through the GUIH project—both this Executive Summary and the website—those who care, from public officials to educators to parents, will find the data and tools they need to fight for our children. We encourage you to use GUIH in your advocacy efforts. The work must continue, now more than ever. Because as we know, the more things change …

Message from CEO *continued*

WELCOME

The Status of Children

THE MORE THEY STAY THE SAME

Rice University professor Stephen L. Klineberg, perhaps best known for gathering data on Houstonians and their beliefs for 40 years, is also known for the saying, "As goes Houston, so goes the nation." Indeed, as the fourth most populous city in the country, and the largest metropolitan city in Texas, Houston represents a diverse population that includes over 580,000 children.[1] This makes Houston a city to learn from! GUIH was originally developed with two equally important goals in mind: to highlight the areas where our youngest residents shine or are well supported, and to call attention to the areas of need and concern. By assembling data biannually on key topics that impact a child's ability to thrive, C@R consistently reshapes the groundwork for policies that should be introduced, modified, or updated, to help our youngest Houstonians flourish.

EMBRACING OUR DIVERSITY

Houston has long been described as one of the most diverse cities in the country, and this new edition does not conclude differently. Within the Greater Houston area, 19% of children are black and 53% are Latinx, while white children represent 21%.[2] Houston is not just racially diverse, of course; across Harris County, an area that encompasses the county seat of Houston and several surrounding communities, over 44% of residents speak a language other than English, with Spanish and Vietnamese leading the list (see **Figure 1** below).[3] Indeed, Houston is home to so many children in immigrant families (51%) that this Executive Summary of GUIH now has a section purely devoted to data around their stories: New American Children (see page 21).[4]

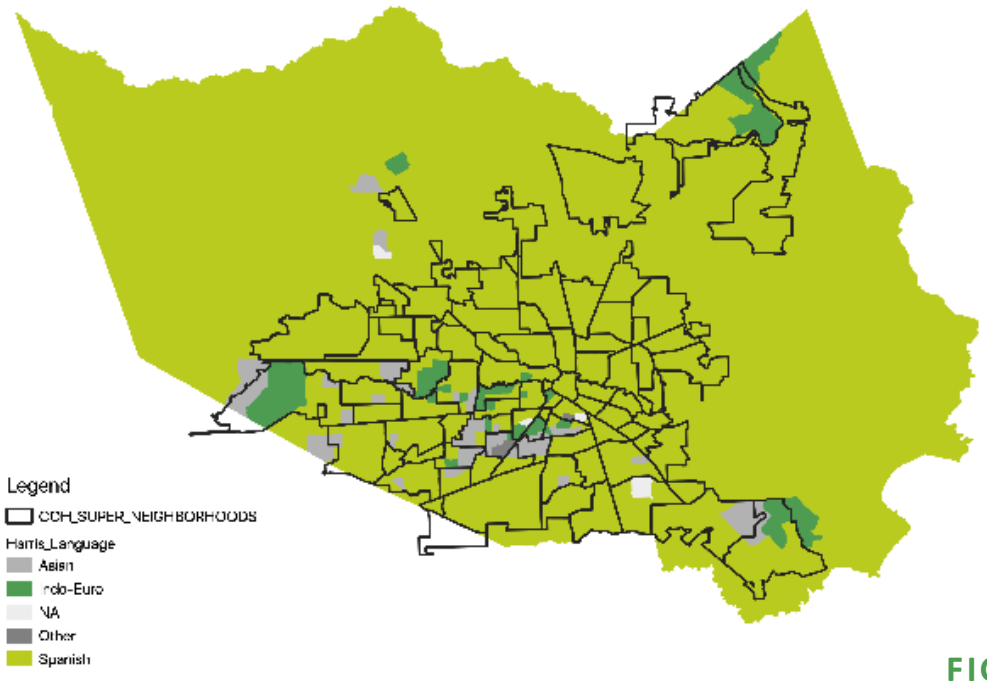

FIGURE 1.
Primary Language Spoken After English by Census Tract, 2018

While the majority of children in the Greater Houston area live in traditional families, over 12% do not live in a traditional nuclear home with biological, step, or adoptive parents. In fact, 8% live with grandparents, and nearly 15,000 (1.2%) reside in foster care.[5] Furthermore, 36% live in single-parent households, which are primarily female-lead.[6]

IDENTIFYING THE OBSTACLES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Houston's children are fortunate to have access to the rich experiences that a multicultural city offers, yet they also face numerous obstacles. As we entered 2020, the year of a pandemic and a severe economic downturn, 669,461 (73%) children enrolled in Harris County public schools qualified for free or reduced-price meals.[7] Across Harris County, over 31% of children live in low-income households (125% of federal poverty level (FPL),[8] which is approximately $25,701 for a family of 4).[9] The 2019 median household income in Houston was about $51,140.[10] At 669 square miles, Houston is nearly twice as large geographically as Dallas, the next most populous city in Texas. Within that area, we find even more diversity, as represented by the range of median income levels in different neighborhoods. As **Table 1** demonstrates, many neighborhoods in Houston have a low median income, coming in below 150% of the Federal Poverty Level.[11] Meanwhile, neighborhoods like Midtown have a median income of $236,071, which is more than 4 times the median income for the city of Houston.[12] These disparities cannot be ignored, especially given the strong correlation between income and test scores.

TABLE 1.
Median Income for Household of 4 Below 150% FPL by Select Neighborhood, 2019

Neighborhood	Median Income for Family of 4
GULFGATE RIVERVIEW / PINE VALLEY	$31,786.50
HUNTERWOOD	$34,688.00
PLEASANTVILLE AREA	$35,885.50
WESTWOOD	$36,078.50
SHARPSTOWN	$36,094.00
EASTEX - JENSEN AREA	$36,691.00
GREATER GREENSPOINT	$37,143.50
LAWNDALE / WAYSIDE	$37,988.50
GULFTON	$38,220.50

Message from CEO *continued*

WELCOME

Moving Forward

The data and research we share in this Executive Summary and the accompanying online website focus on all of our children, with attention to both the opportunities they have and the challenges they face. Knowing that the most successful policies take a holistic view for our children, the remainder of this summary highlights some of the most important topics in the following areas: education, vulnerability and safety, and health and nutrition. We also look deeper at New American Children (first- and second-generation immigrant children), and Opportunity Youth and Young Adults (defined both by their age, which ranges from 16 to 24, and their disconnection from post-secondary education and workforce participation). We thank JPMorgan Chase & Co. for their special sponsorship of this latter group, which has gained attention in recent years as an often-overlooked population of vulnerable youth.

It is the firm belief of C@R that children are the future, and that within their diversity lies their strength. Please use the data and research accumulated here to continue to fight for their future, and for the prosperity of the Greater Houston area.

For children!

Robert Sanborn, Ed. D
President and CEO

children at Risk

METHODOLOGICAL NOTES: The data contained in this report represent a combination of our own primary data and several secondary sources, including but not limited to data from American Community Survey, Texas Workforce Commission, and the Texas Education Agency. For more details, please see all endnotes here.

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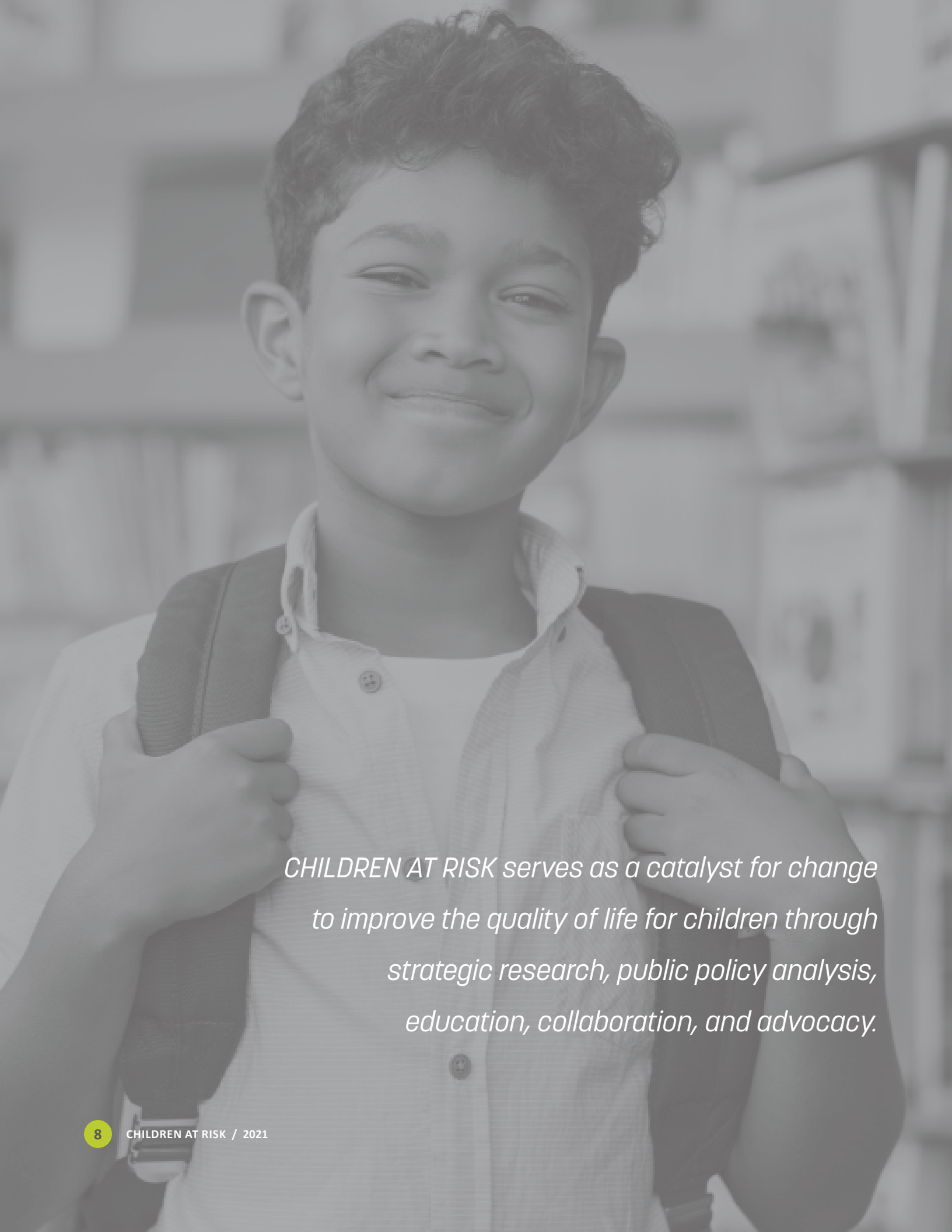
Growing Up In Houston:



CHILDREN AT RISK serves as a catalyst for change to improve the quality of life for children through strategic research, public policy analysis, education, collaboration, and advocacy.

Growing Up In Houston: The Early Childhood Education Experience

EARLY EDUCATION

Exposure to high-quality early childhood education (ECE) is the foundation to future academic success. In the early stages of development, a child's brain is malleable, and the elasticity of how the brain develops in the early years makes early engagement a strategy for success. This is especially true for children living in poverty who have the socio-economic odds stacked against them. For many of these children, quality ECE can buffer the negative effects associated with poverty on later academic achievement. Increasingly, studies show ECE is a promising mechanism for promoting literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional and cognitive skills. Additionally, children participating in ECE prior to kindergarten, on average, have higher high school graduation rates, lower enrollment in special education programs, and lower rates of behavioral issues later in life.[13] Vast amounts of research supporting the positive effects of high-quality ECE serve as further evidence that access to high-quality ECE prior to kindergarten is essential for our most vulnerable populations.

In Texas, the primary source of funding for the child care industry is the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG). CCDBG is the federal funding source for subsidized child care, which is managed by the Texas Workforce Commission. In the March 2018 omnibus appropriations bill, Congress increased the CCDBG funding by $2.3 billion, bringing the annual funding in Texas to over $740 million. The funding is distributed to 28 Local Workforce Development Boards across the state. This additional funding increased the total children served in 2017 from roughly 100,000 to more than 130,000 in 2018. However, the current subsidy system still serves only 10% of eligible children. Additionally, it is estimated **that only 9.7% (during the period of January 2019 to March 2020) of providers were enrolled in the state's Quality Rating and Improvement System, known as Texas Rising Star.**[14] The low enrollment and participation rates severely limit the access to affordable high-quality child care for children from low-income families. Access to such services is essential to future child development and the viability of our workforce.

CHILD CARE IN HOUSTON: ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE HIGH-QUALITY CHILD CARE

Houston is home to 348,188 children ages 0-4; roughly 80,000 of them are living in low-income households.[15] Additionally, in 2019, 76% of Houston children were living in a subsidized child care desert.[16] A zip code is a "child care desert" if the number of children under age 6 with working parents is 3 times greater than the licensed capacity of child care providers in the area. In efforts to address this need, the Gulf Coast Workforce Development Board used the additional 2018 CCDBG funding to reduce the amount of children and families on the subsidized child care waitlist. This resulted in a decrease from roughly 12,000 in 2017 to roughly 3,000 in 2018.[17]

It is important to note that increasing access alone is not enough. Access to child care does not equate to access to quality child care. One way to systematically assess the quality of child care is through Texas Rising Star (TRS)

EARLY EDUCATION

– a systematic framework used to measure, improve, and communicate quality across a range of indicators. However, among the 4,500 providers (center and home) in Harris County, only **41% of providers participate in the subsidy program and roughly 21% of providers participate in TRS**. This means that nearly **25,000** children in the subsidy program attended child care facilities that were not TRS certified.[18] **FIGURE 2** shows the percentage increase over the past 5 years in TRS provider participation and in children served by TRS providers.[19]

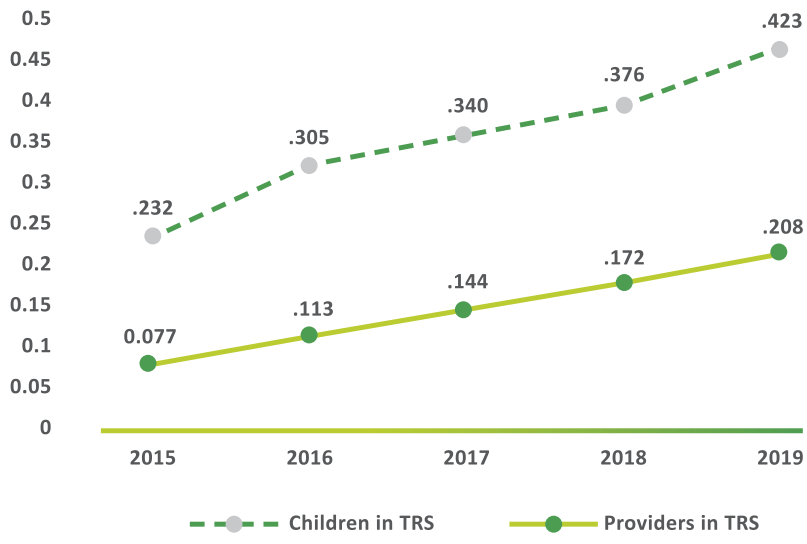


FIGURE 2
The Percentage of TRS Children and Providers in Gulf Coast Region, 2015-2019

SUPPORTING OUR EDUCATORS LEADS TO QUALITY CARE

The quality of child care is also largely dependent on the quality of our ECE educators. Educators play a critical role in shaping the developmental outcomes of children. Unfortunately, educators face challenges that prevent them from providing the highest quality of care. They receive persistently low wages – often so low that roughly **56% qualify for at least one form of public benefit programs.**[20] As a result, we see high turnover rates among educators.[21] In Houston, the average child care educator earns about $25,000 per year, with an average hourly wage of $11.97/hour.[22] Paying educators sustainable wages reduces turnover and provides stability for both child care providers and families seeking care. When educators are prepared to teach, compensated adequately, and supported, they are better prepared to contribute to the quality of care children receive.

INCREASING ACCESS TO PUBLIC PRE-KINDERGARTEN

Full-day Pre-K is an invaluable resource for children from low-income families. Research has shown that attending Pre-K contributes positively to a child's future academic success. In 2019, there were roughly 46,000 eligible 3- and 4-year-old children enrolled in public Pre-K in Harris County.[23]

In the 86th Legislative Session, the Texas Legislature passed House Bill 3 (HB 3), which, among other things, provided funding for full-day public Pre-K for all eligible 4-year-old children in the state. Prior to its implementation, **Houston ISD was on the right track with kindergarten-readiness increasing by 21.4% in 2018-19. Still, the STAR-E and STAR-S**, kindergarten-readiness assessments based on literacy, revealed that **only 41.3% of Houston ISD children were kindergarten-ready for the 2018-19 school year.**[24] For students in HISD who attended public Pre-K, the percentage ready for kindergarten rose from 18.2% in 2017-2018 to 47.6% in the 2018-2019 school year. Furthermore, students who attended quality public Pre-K scored an average of 28 points higher on their STAAR third-grade reading assessment than those who did not attend public Pre-K.[25]

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) issued waivers to some districts and open-enrollment charter schools, exempting them from providing full-day Pre-K. For instance, schools and districts might receive a waiver if they needed to construct new classroom facilities to comply with HB3.[26] Out of the 90 school districts in Region 4, an educational district which represents the 7-county area in the Gulf Coast (including Harris and Galveston), 26 have received either a 1-, 2-, or 3-year waiver from TEA. See **TABLE 2**.[27]

TABLE 2

Full-Day Pre-Kindergarten Waivers in Region 4, 2019-2020

% 1 Year Waivers	% 2 Year Waivers	% 3 Year Waivers	Total % Waived	Total Districts Waived	Total Districts
17%	1%	11%	29%	26	90

School districts who have received waivers must seek an alternative solution to providing full day Pre-K, such as Pre-Kindergarten Partnerships with high-quality child care providers. Pre-Kindergarten Partnerships (Pre-K Partnerships) is an opportunity to increase access to high-quality ECE for children from low-income families. Pre-K Partnerships are collaborative efforts between the public and private sector to minimize or eliminate gaps in the quality of child care provided to early learners. Within a Pre-K Partnership, a privately funded child care center contracts with a public institution to provide additional seats for Pre-K children. This initiative not only allocates funding to the private child care center, but also moves towards the state's goal of providing full day Pre-K opportunities to low-income children. This solution may minimize or eliminate the gaps in the quality of child care provided to early learners. In the Gulf Coast region, one formal Pre-K Partnership has been formed and there are 5 in the process of forming.

EARLY EDUCATION

Pandemic vs. Systemic: Beyond Child Care Deserts

Many Texas child care providers have closed as the COVID-19 pandemic spreads, leaving working families without child care and leaving child care operations vulnerable to permanent closure. Prior to COVID-19, 1 in 12 Texas children lived in a child care desert, and we anticipate that number to grow exponentially as child care operations struggle to remain profitable. Prior to COVID-19, the capacity of Harris County child care providers was already stretched thin, with providers only being able to serve 20% of children in Harris County. COVID-19 has not only limited children and their families from accessing child care, but it has increased the number of child care deserts across the county.

Vision for Our Ch*ildren*

- All children have access to high-quality affordable child care, regardless of their families' income.
- Educators are properly prepared, rewarded, and supported to provide the highest quality care.
- Racial equity becomes the foundation for understanding systemic barriers preventing young children from reaching their optimal developmental outcomes.
- An integrated early childhood system is developed to meet the diverse needs of our most vulnerable children and families.
- All children develop in nurturing early learning environments that put them on a path towards success.

Growing Up In Houston: PK-12 Education

PK-12 EDUCATION

Houston's schools are critical institutions for fostering the well-being of the whole child. Beyond academic enrichment, schools offer vital health and social-emotional supports for children. In this section we highlight data that salutes high-performing, high-poverty schools, but also emphasizes the social inequalities that our students must transcend.

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND OPPORTUNITY

Quality early education has benefits in elementary school and beyond. Children who cannot read on grade level by 3rd grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school. Students falling behind and living in poverty are 13 times more likely to drop out of high school than their counterparts.[28] In Texas' Region 4, an educational district which represents a 7-county area in the Gulf Coast (including Harris and Galveston), **only 46% of third graders meet standards on their state reading exam.** That number drops to 35% for low-income students.[29]

The Texas Education Agency considers 53% of Greater Houston students at risk of dropping out of school—higher than the statewide average of 50%.[30] Studies have shown that three measures—establishing a "culture of high expectations", designating more time on task, and using data to intervene early—are vital in keeping children academically successful. The Greater Houston area's Gold Ribbon schools (schools that are 75% low-income and receive an A or B rating in C@R's Texas School Rankings) successfully establish these expectations and supports for their students.[31] In 2019, Houston had 81 Gold Ribbon schools across elementary, middle, and high school.[32] **Table 3** shows the top Gold Ribbon schools for each level.

TABLE 3

Top (grade A) Houston Area
Gold Ribbon Schools by School Type, 2019

ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS
Deanda Elementary School (Houston ISD)
Sanchez Elementary School (Houston ISD)
Taylor Ray Elementary School (Lamar CISD)
Park Place Elementary School (Houston ISD)
High Island School (High Island ISD)
MIDDLE SCHOOLS
High Island School (High Island ISD)
Edward Roberson Middle School (Spring ISD)
Albright Middle School (Alief ISD)
HIGH SCHOOLS
High Island School (High Island ISD)

PK-12 EDUCATION

SCHOOLS PROVIDE IMPORTANT SERVICES OUTSIDE OF ACADEMIC LEARNING

Schools provide wrap-around services and supports that are integral to a child's development and future achievement. As the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted, schools are a trusted source for students to receive meals, engage in socio-emotional learning, and receive mental and physical health support. Hungry students cannot learn, and students' performances suffer when they do not have access to the resources they need to thrive.

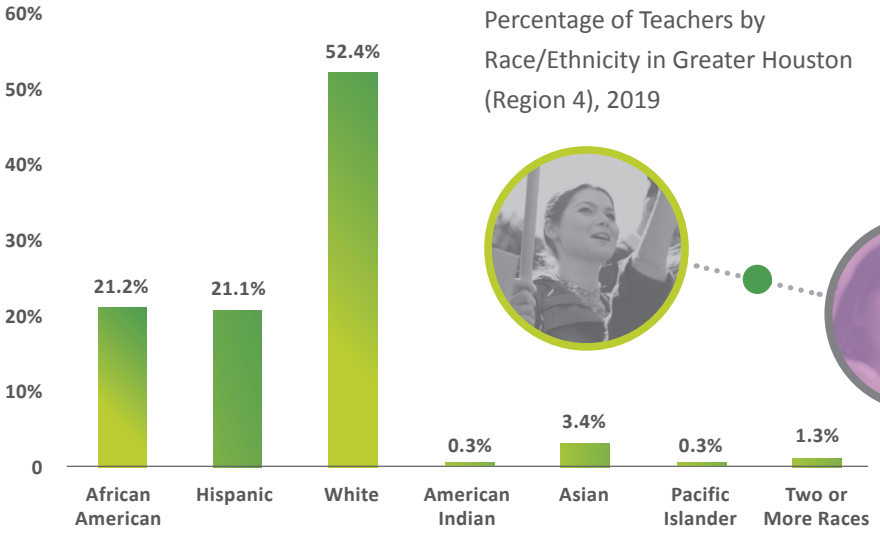
In Houston, around 43% of students received free or reduced-price lunch during the 2019-2020 school year.[33] Over the summer, school campuses and nonprofit organizations have worked together to provide millions of meals to students in need. As of August 18, 2020, **4,138,777 breakfast meals and 4,457,884 lunches were claimed monthly in Region 4 as part of the Summer Meals Program,[34] compared to 938,071 breakfasts and 1,573,645 lunches in summer 2019**. Many of these food distribution sites also operate as COVID-19 feeding centers, offering meals to families affected by the pandemic. This astounding increase showcases how schools meet the profound needs of children and families for meals they are unable or unlikely to receive at home.

AN UNEQUAL PLAYING FIELD: SEGREGATION AND INEQUALITY IN HOUSTON SCHOOLS

In Houston, persistent socioeconomic and racial inequalities have led to unbalanced opportunities for low-income and minority students. **In 2019-20, 66% of students enrolled in Region 4 were classified as economically disadvantaged.**[35] These social inequalities are often mirrored within Houston area schools and the quality of education that these students receive. Data shows that Houston schools are just as segregated now as they were 50 years ago, shortly after the landmark Supreme Court case, Brown v. Board of Education.[36] Concentrating students with social and economic disadvantages in racially and economically homogeneous schools further depresses student performance.[37] This segregation systemically harms the achievement potential of minority students (especially Black and Latinx students).[38] Even within these homogenous educational environments, many Houston students do not have the opportunity to see themselves reflected in their teachers. **Figure 3** shows the racial distribution of teachers in Region 4. The distribution of teacher ethnicities does not mirror the ethnic make-up of students, as nearly 50% of students in Region 4 are Latinx, 18.4% are black, and 21% are white.[39]

FIGURE 3

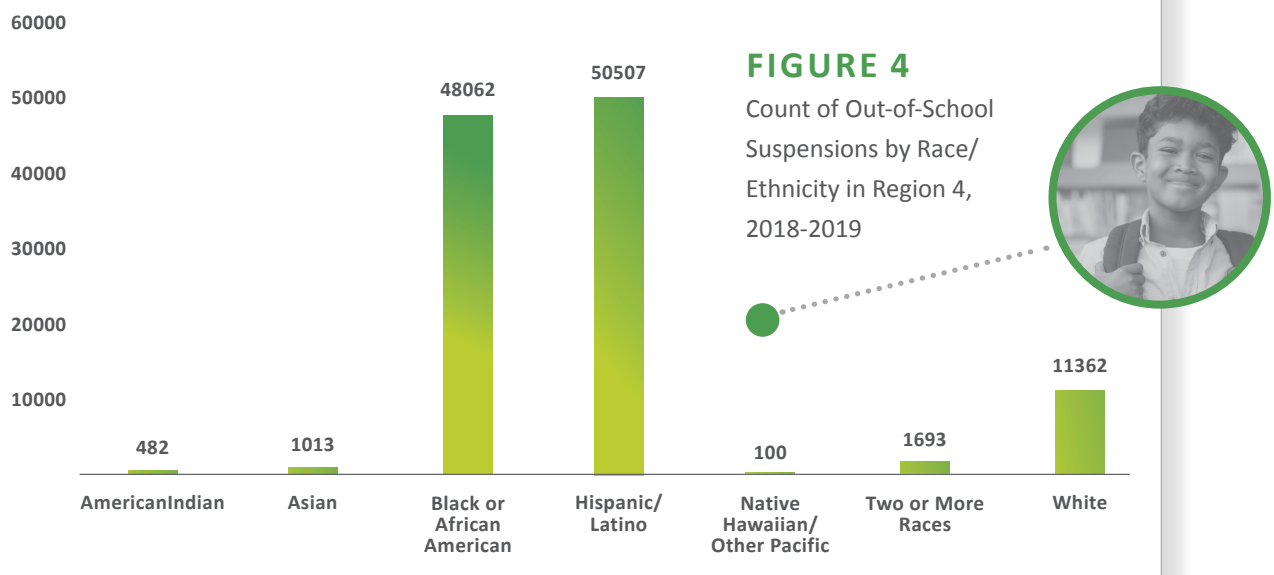
Percentage of Teachers by Race/Ethnicity in Greater Houston (Region 4), 2019



Disciplinary actions disproportionately affect black students. **Figure 4** shows the racial distribution of out-of-school suspensions;[40] black students are clearly disproportionately represented given that nearly 50% of students in Region 4 are Latinx, 18.4% are black, and 21% are white, as noted above. This unequal targeting for suspensions and disciplinary action inhibits the potential of black students, as this leads to less time in the classroom receiving instruction.

FIGURE 4

Count of Out-of-School Suspensions by Race/ Ethnicity in Region 4, 2018-2019



PK-12 EDUCATION

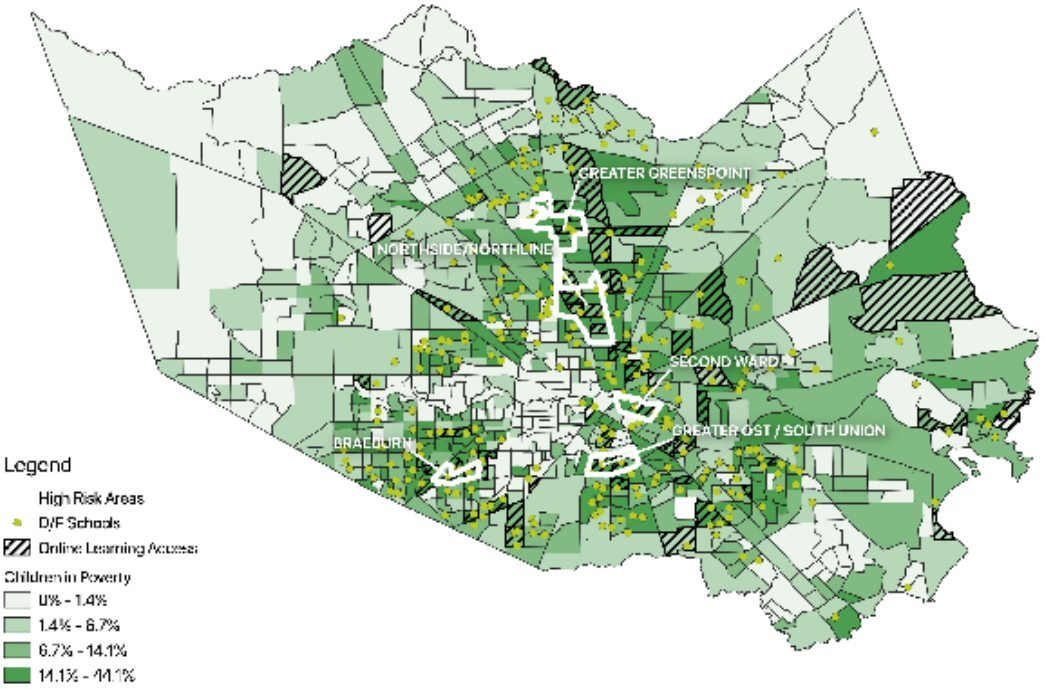
Racial disparities are also evident in college readiness rates. **In Region 4, the 4-year high school graduation rate is 89%; however, only 52% of those graduates are considered college ready**.[41] This level of readiness varies drastically by ethnicity. Only 36% of black students and 45% of Latinx students are considered college ready upon graduation, compared to 66% of white students and 85% of Asian students.[42]

Pandemic vs. Systemic: Who is Missing?

The COVID-19 pandemic has completely upended our education system, with students and teachers suddenly expected to learn and teach online despite technological limitations. Compounded with the summer learning loss that occurs every year, Houston students may find themselves significantly behind academically with little hope to catch up. Students returned to school in Fall 2020 with an estimated **63-68% of reading gain retained compared to previous years, and 37-50% for math learning gains.**[43] According to TEA, on average, about 2% of students from all Houston-area school districts were completely uncontactable in the spring of 2020, and nearly 9.3% of students were not engaged.[44]

The Offline Learners maps **(Figure 5**) created by C@R highlight areas that have multiple barriers facing children and families attempting to adjust and learn in this new reality of online learning or hybrid learning. This analysis shows neighborhoods in Harris County that are of concern due to a convergence of factors: a high concentration of child poverty, lack of access to online learning, and low-performing schools in Harris County.[45]

FIGURE 5 Offline Learners in Harris County



Vision for Our Children

PK-12 EDUCATION

- All Houston children have access to high-quality, affordable pre-K that sets them up for future academic success.
- Houston's students experience more time on task.
- All students experience a culture of high expectations in their schools.
- Houston schools quickly identify students' academic and social-emotional struggles and intervene effectively and compassionately using thoughtfully collected data.
- Houston schools promote racial integration through funding, hiring practices, and professional development.
- Houston schools receive the resources to provide equitable education and work towards improving the outcomes of our most socially vulnerable children.
- Houston schools focus on the whole child by making sure that their basic needs are met, including access to mental and behavioral health, nutritious food, and safe and secure housing.

PARENTING

Growing Up In Houston: Parenting

PARENTS AS A CHILD'S FIRST TEACHER

In many ways, parents are a child's first and most important teacher. They play a crucial role in laying the foundation for their child's educational achievement and cognitive development, but parents should not have to face this challenge alone. It is essential that our families, especially those from low-income or vulnerable communities, have access to quality affordable child care. Unfortunately, there are many families who are unable to afford the high cost. According to federal recommendations, child care should cost no more than 7% of a family's income.[46] However, in the Houston region, an average family with **one infant and one toddler can expect to pay almost a third (30%) of their annual income. For a family living in poverty, that jumps to 70% of their income.**[47]

While most parents want to position their child for long-term success, it isn't always easy to understand the quality of child care options in your neighborhood. The state funded Texas Rising Star (TRS) website (https://texasrisingstar.org/parents/find-a-trs-provider/) allows parents to search for quality rated providers. Under the TRS approval system, subsidized child care programs are rated on the quality or certification level of their staff, environmental safety, class sizes, teacher-student ratios, and curriculum. The highest quality rating a child care provider can receive is TRS 4-Star.

Parents are encouraged, when possible, to prioritize quality when enrolling their child in a child care program, whether that be a national accredited program or TRS rated. The state should open the TRS program to non-subsidy providers, require all providers accepting public subsidies to participate in the TRS system, and increase reimbursement rates. These policy changes would reduce child care deserts and incentivize providers to create high-quality programs, overall improving parents' access to quality child care. Until Texas addresses the limited supply of quality, affordable child care, children and families from low-income backgrounds will continue to be faced with limited quality options for child care.

PARENTS ARE THE STRONGEST ADVOCATES FOR THEIR CHILD

Studies show that when parents are engaged, their children are more likely to stay on top of their school tasks and increase their overall academic achievement. Supporting and supervising their child's learning helps parents identify the right times to advocate for their child if problems arise. Prior to the pandemic, the best way for parents to engage in a child's education was to maintain open communication with their teachers.

However, as learning from home continues into this school year, parents are finding themselves much more engaged in their child's learning than they had been in the past. While this may be taxing for parents now, there are long-term benefits to remaining active in their child's learning. From the educator's perspective, at home learning also provides an opportunity to engage parents in a new way. Online access can offer more responsive support and communication than traditional parent engagement activities.

KEEPING CHILDREN CONNECTED INTO ADULTHOOD

As parents, the best way to prevent youth from becoming disconnected from the traditional pathways of young adults is to support them in furthering their education or pursuing employment. Without connections to college or career paths, young adults risk future unemployment and lower wages throughout their lives. It is important to share with children the variety of opportunities available, and parents can encourage educational pursuits by being frank about the challenges that could lead to disconnection and connecting children to resources and mentors.

Pandemic vs. Systemic: The Mental Health Needs of Our Children

Mental health is a significant component to the overall well-being of children. Social-Emotional supports are critical for children as they learn how to identify and express their feelings, handle stress, and navigate social situations with their peers and community. Nevertheless, families and schools have long suffered from the lack of resources needed to appropriately address healthy whole-child development, and these needs have only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Center for School Behavioral Health (CSBH) at Mental Health America of Greater Houston completed an assessment survey in March and April 2020. With the participation of staff from 24 school districts in the Greater Houston Area, the survey assessed the mental health needs of students as a result of the pandemic. This assessment identified the top behavioral health needs as anxiety, stress, coping strategies and isolation, and the ability to supply useful tips for parents. As a result of COVID-19, **86% of participating staff indicated that they believe students could benefit from virtual behavioral health training provided by their campus or district.**[48]

Children in our community need greater mental health supports. In August 2020, **63% of youth screened in Houston/Harris County/Ft. Bend were found to be "at risk" for emotional, attentional, or behavioral difficulties.** Additionally, 50% of parents screened indicated that they have a child "at risk" for emotional, attentional, or behavioral difficulties.[49]

The funding and infrastructure must be put in place to address these needs so that our children do not suffer greater socio-emotional consequences because of the pandemic. Several community organizations are working to address this need including Communities In Schools. In the 2018-2019 school year, they served over 5200 students throughout the Greater Houston area. Schools and community leaders must also take the role of the parent or caregiver into account when providing programs and critical support.

- Toll-free, 24-hour **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** at **1-800-273-TALK** (1-800-273-8255); TTY: 1-800-799-4TTY (4889)

PARENTING

Vision for Our Children

- All parents have access to an affordable, high-quality childcare program.
- Houston area schools increase their outreach to students' caregivers and expand virtual opportunities and support for parental engagement.
- Parents in the Greater Houston region have access to resources and needed supports to prevent their youth from becoming disconnected as they grow into adulthood.
- Resource and referral processes are in place to support families when children's mental and behavioral health needs are identified.

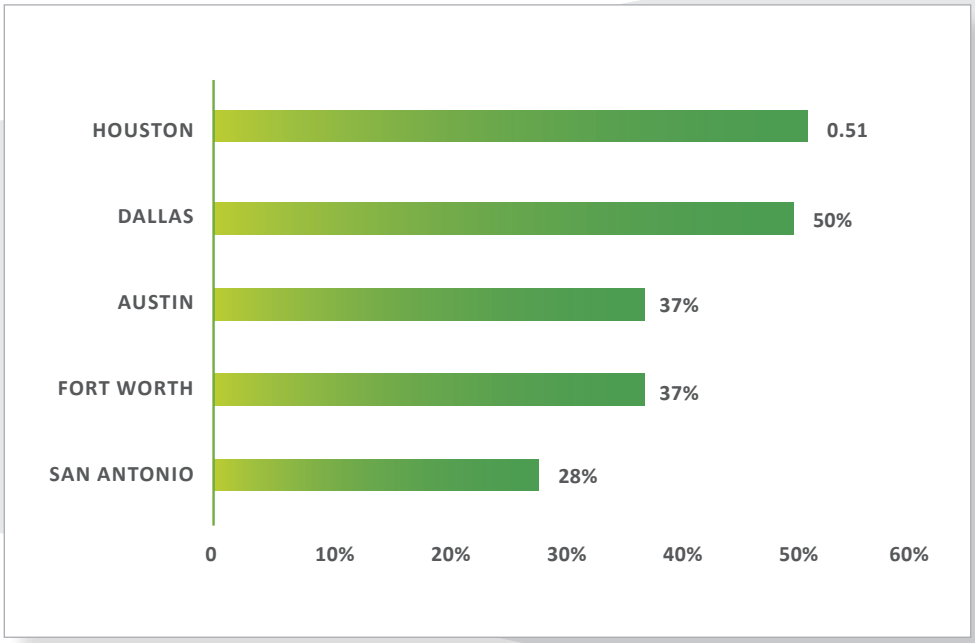
Growing Up In Houston: Who are New American Children?

NEW AMERICAN

C@R defines New American Children as first- and second-generation immigrant children, a populous group diverse in status and culture. This group of children often faces obstacles that may affect their psychosocial development and adaptability. The stress related to learning English as a new language, navigating a new culture, and exploring a new environment is clear. Additionally, New American Children and their families often face adversity through poverty, residential mobility, broken family ties, and a loss of social support networks.[50]

There are about 2,486,000 children in immigrant families in Texas[51] and 298,000 in Houston,[52] the city with the highest number of New American Children in the state (see **Figure 6** below).[53] Although New American Children may be documented or undocumented, 84%, or 249,000, are United States citizens.[54]

FIGURE 6
Percentage of Children in Immigrant Families in Texas by City, 2018



DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

While most New American Children in the United States, Texas, and Houston are Latinx, the variations in ethnicity, language, and family composition highlight the importance of multicultural understanding.[55] As seen in **Figure 7**, 77% (226,000) of children in immigrant families in Houston have at least one resident, foreign-born parent from Latin America, while 40,000 have one or more parents from Asia, and 18,000 from Africa.[56] This variation shows just how diverse our city is and shows that while the vast majority of New American Children are born in the United States, they still have family ties to other countries, thus enriching their identity.

NEW AMERICAN

The diversity of New American Children continues with linguistic differences. Forty-nine percent of Houston residents speak a language other than English at home, including 39% Spanish speakers.[57] Sometimes, even if parents of New American Children speak another language fluently, they choose not to teach it to their children for fear of them not being fluent in English and/or facing discrimination. Ironically, this can be detrimental to New American Children as they become adults and seek employment in a market that favors bilingualism. In households where only New American Children speak English but not their adult family members, youth often take on the role of translator, which can put them in decision-making roles too soon.

Finally, most Houston immigrant households with children are headed by married couples (64%) (see **Figure 8** below).[58] These households are also quite settled, on average, with 94% of these same children having resident parents who have been in the country for more than five years.[59]

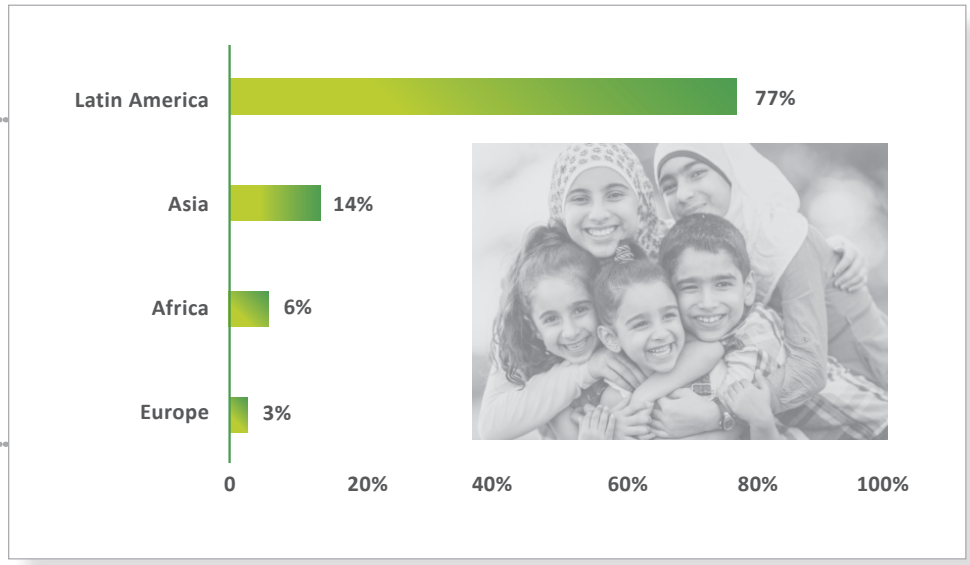


FIGURE 7
Children in Immigrant Families by Parent's Region of Origin in Houston, 2018

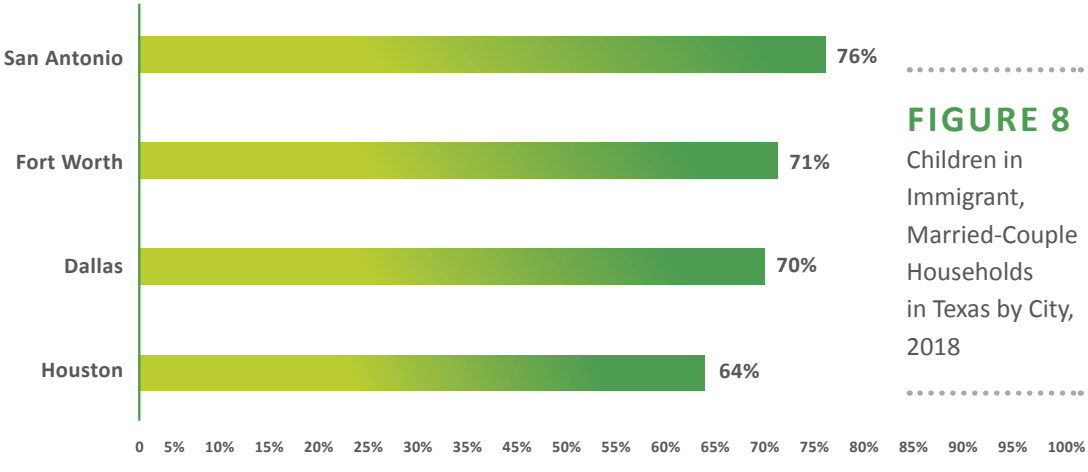


FIGURE 8
Children in Immigrant, Married-Couple Households in Texas by City, 2018

EDUCATION INTERVENTION

NEW AMERICAN

New American Children face educational challenges in part due to their immigration concerns. According to C@R's original research from 2019, 73% of school staff in the Houston area reported that their students were concerned about immigration issues.[60] Considering the impact of these concerns, 66% of staff observed behavioral/emotional problems related to recent immigration policies.[61] Supporting these findings, in a separate academic study, 61% of nationwide public school educators noticed a decline in students' academic performance.[62] This was due to increased anxiety in children whose families were of mixed status. The uncertainty of how the new immigration policies might affect their families, including possible separation, has proven to have negative psycho-emotional effects that impact New American Children's academic performance. As next steps to combat the damaging effects of immigration-related concerns, 78% of Houston area school staff indicated that receiving immigration training would be helpful, and 83% said that trauma training would be useful, as visualized in **Figure 9.**[63]

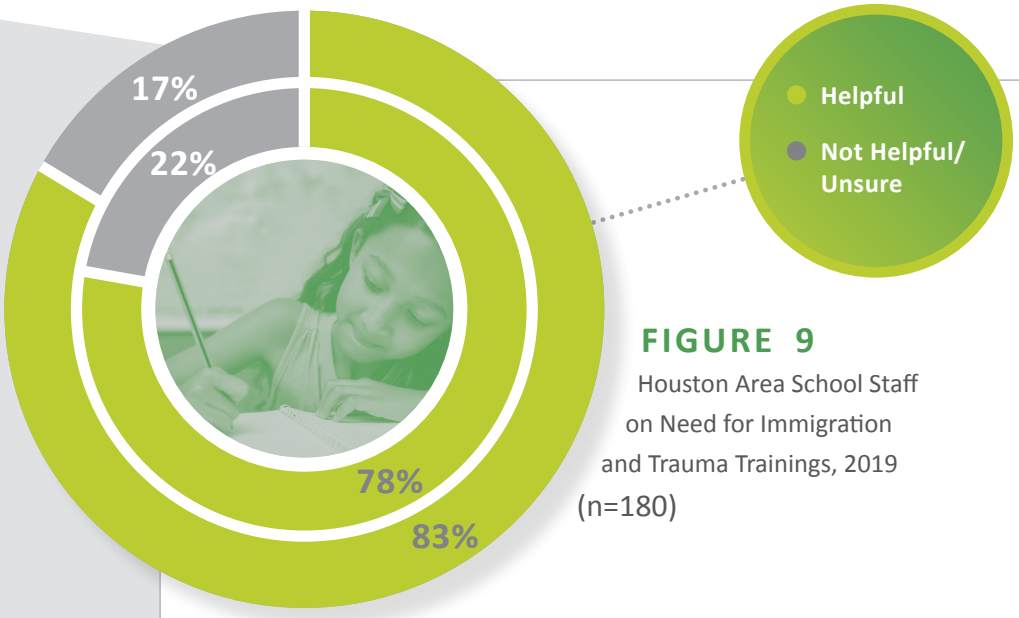


FIGURE 9

Houston Area School Staff on Need for Immigration and Trauma Trainings, 2019 (n=180)

CHILDREN LIVING IN A NEW WORLD

For New American Children, access to social supports is impacted greatly by the challenges their parents face. Notably, these challenges are not limited to first-generation New American Children, but also manifest for second-generation children, whose parents are likely to still speak their native language at home. These parents often need their children's assistance in navigating daily life, whether that be within educational, health care, or legal systems. Even while many immigrant families have limited access to resources, this challenge can be exacerbated by the lack of trust immigrant families may have in the "system"; this mistrust is based in the fear around immigration status.

NEW AMERICAN

For instance, many immigrants are concerned about the Public Charge Rule, wherein a person who uses government financial assistance (and could thereby become a public charge) risks challenges to citizenship or adjustment of status. Nearly 8 million children, many of whom are citizens, live with families of mixed status that are affected by the Public Charge Rule.[64]

It is beneficial for parents to access support systems that will help them become better acquainted with their new environment and identify resources. From a previous study at C@R, parents reported trusting their children's schools, churches, and community centers. It is critical that these organizations offer accurate information in various languages and dialects and through different mediums, including digitally and in-person.

Systemic or Pandemic: Limited Access to Resources Continues

During the COVID-19 pandemic, issues of inequity have been exacerbated for vulnerable populations, including immigrant families. Because of the pandemic, it has been harder for parents to get information and resources from their trusted sources, and they not only fear the repercussions of immigration policies, but also the health implications that come with COVID-19.

A survey of Houston Spanish-speaking families created by C@R and distributed by Univision and the Mexican Consulate in Houston, found the following:

- 70% of participants were receiving Pandemic SNAP, or (P-EBT)
- 37% had lost their jobs due to the pandemic
- 89% felt unsafe sending their children back to child care

Financial insecurity and limited access to resources amplified by the pandemic can make it harder for parents to provide their children with a safe and stable environment.

Vision for Our Children

- Schools become inclusive environments, both in terms of curriculum and parental outreach, to help meet the different needs of New American Children and their parents.
- Educators of New American Children receive professional support, particularly focusing on trauma-informed training and skills for working with immigrant and refugee children.
- Houston's New American Children have affordable access to healthcare, quality education, and social-emotional support, all of which promote a stable and thriving environment for children to grow.
- New American Children Public have mental health support, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Growing Up in Houston: Who are our Opportunity Youth and Young Adults, and How Can We Define the Newly Disconnected?

OPPORTUNITY

The term Opportunity Youth and Young Adults (OYYA) refers to youth between the age of 16-24 who are disconnected from the conventional paths of young adults (e.g. neither in school, nor in the workforce). This disconnection may stem from various factors, including but not limited to drug addiction, not finishing school, or being a teen parent. Given that we know the adolescent brain is still developing, it is incumbent upon us to provide the right programs and policies to support these young adults.[65] As exemplified in the name, this is a group with tremendous potential for success if given the right support. Investing in OYYA today will pay dividends for society in the long term. We see this clearly by considering the alternative: studies estimate that the 6.7 million OYYA in the country in the year 2011 resulted in lifetime earning loss of $1.6 trillion.[66] The urgency is found in both the private and public good: not only is this transition time critical for long-term success and happiness, but these individuals are part of Houston's future, and must be well prepared to contribute.

Even prior to the pandemic, OYYA comprised a significant percentage of young adults in the Houston area. In 2018, this group was estimated to consist of 74,900 youth and young adults or a little over 13% of the total youth population in Harris County, which is slightly higher than the 2018 national average of 11.2%, or 1 in 9 youth.[67] OYYA are found everywhere: in urban, rural, and suburban areas. They are of varied races and financial backgrounds. Specifically in Harris County, shown below in **Figure 10**, Latinx youth make up the majority of OYYA at 52%, followed by blacks at 24%, whites at 19%, Asians at 4%, and other racial groups at 2%.[68]

As shown in **Figure 11** on page 26, opportunity youth in Harris County also represent a wide spectrum of educational attainment, with 48% having only a high school diploma and 21% attaining less than a high school diploma.[69] Notably, only 8% of this group obtain a post-secondary degree—with 6% earning a bachelor's degree and 2% earning an associate's degree.

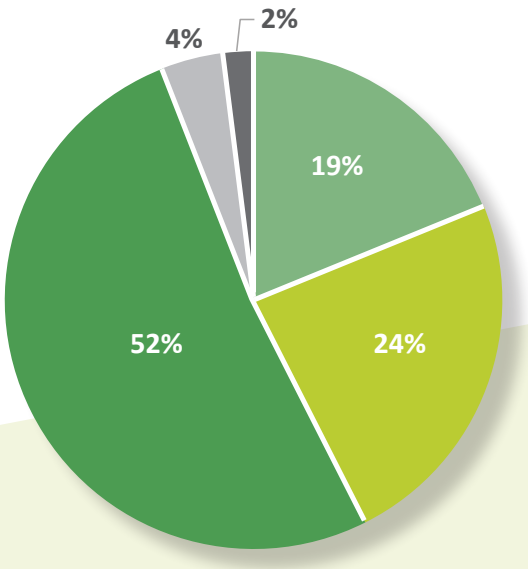


FIGURE 10.

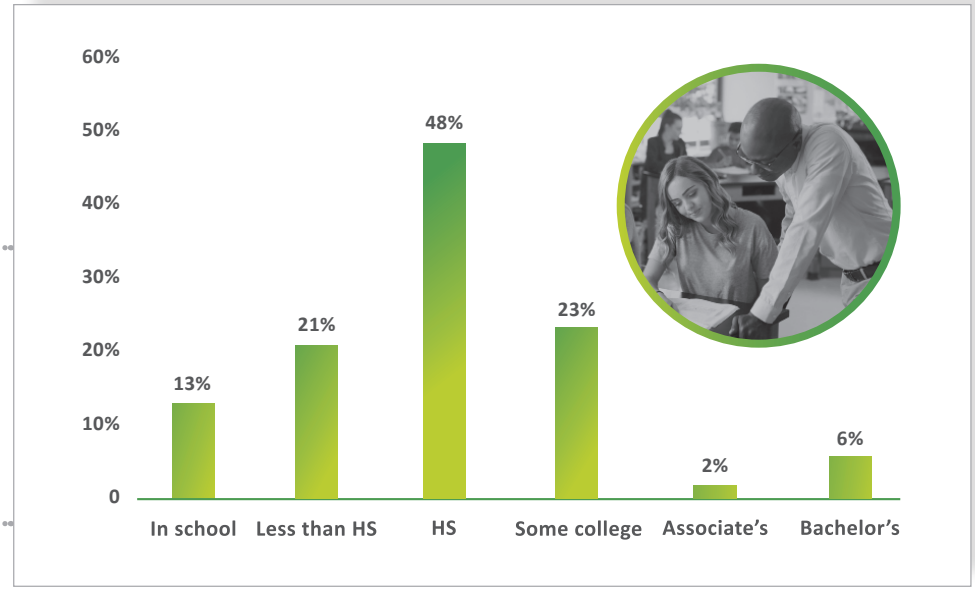
Racial Composition of Out-Of-Work Youth (Age 18-24) in Harris County, 2015

- White
- Black
- Hispanic
- Asian
- Other

Note: "Out-of-Work Youth" are defined as all young people who are not working, minus most traditional high school and college students, since these are socially approved reasons for remaining outside of the labor force. Also excluded from this group are those receiving disability benefits and all graduate students. Included in this number are a small representation of high school students who live independently and college students who are actively seeking employment. n=72,400

OPPORTUNITY

FIGURE 11.
Out-of-Work Youth in Harris County by Educational Attainment, 2015
n=72,400



What leads to disconnection?

While OYYA come from all walks of life, certain groups of young people are disproportionately represented. One group of young adults who are at a higher risk of being disconnected from school and the workforce are teenage mothers.[70] Another group of young people who are at an increased risk of becoming disconnected are foster youth— those who age out of the foster care system without having a permanent, stable support system. Other youth at risk of disconnection lacked the supports to graduate high school or were somehow involved in the juvenile justice system.

On the surface, the decline in the number of teen pregnancies is a success story. In Texas, the teen birth rate declined 68% between 1991 and 2018, and in 2015, the public savings due to the decline in teen birth rates totaled $418 million. Meanwhile, in 2018, there were 25,089 teen births, with 72% of the births occurring among girls aged 18-19.[71] Teen mothers face significant challenges to completing their education, and only 50% of teen mothers receive a high school diploma by age 22 compared to 90% of girls who did not give birth.[72] Furthermore, teen mothers face the stigmatization of being a teen parent, isolation from their peers and the lack of much needed support from family, friends, school and social services. This is highlighted by the number of teen mothers in the foster care system. Harris County had the second-highest number of foster care-involved pregnant teens in 2019 with 39 pregnant teens, behind Bexar County with 54 pregnant teens. Harris County also had 36 youth parents in the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services conservatorship in 2019, and 5 children were born to youths in conservatorship and subsequently placed under conservatorship.[73] The increased likelihood of Texas foster youth to become pregnant compared to other Texas teens is due to a number of risk factors including trauma and family dysfunction.[74]

The foster care system creates its own challenges when it comes to OYYA, because children who are not permanently placed with a caregiver may age out of the foster care system. This occurs when the youth turns eighteen. Best practices indicate that caseworkers should start preparing a child for exit no later than sixteen. **In Harris County last year, 254 children aged out of foster care.**[75] Children who age out of foster care face a number of challenges, such as finding housing or a job with no credit or employment history. These youth are especially vulnerable to economic insecurity, homelessness, sexual exploitation, and exploitative labor practices.[76]

OPPORTUNITY YOUTH

There are options for youth aging out of foster care, but many children are not even aware of these opportunities or prepared by adults or the system to take advantage of them. Young adults can enroll in extended care if they fulfill certain requirements, such as enrollment in high school, college, or many job training programs. Supervised Independent Living is an option for youth who wish to leave a foster care setting but still need guidance and support. In Houston, DePelchin Children's Center provides temporary housing for former foster care youth who are facing homelessness.[77] Furthermore, Texas youth who age out of foster care are eligible for the State College Tuition Waiver, which waives tuition and fees at state-supported colleges.[78] Even with this financial support, foster care children require support navigating the bureaucracy, paperwork, and requirements of these programs, and closer attention must be paid to access and utilization.

Systemic or Pandemic?: What will the Economic Downturn Mean?

It is reasonable to propose that changes in Houston's economy and the impact of virtual schooling in 2020 have substantially increased the number of youth who are disconnected. **In fact, some researchers theorize that the percentage of disconnected youth —which has been gradually declining in the last decade— may increase to as much as 25% as a result of the pandemic.**[79] **Unfortunately, due to the limitations of data collection in general, and the specific population of interest, these figures will not be clear until perhaps 2021 or beyond.**

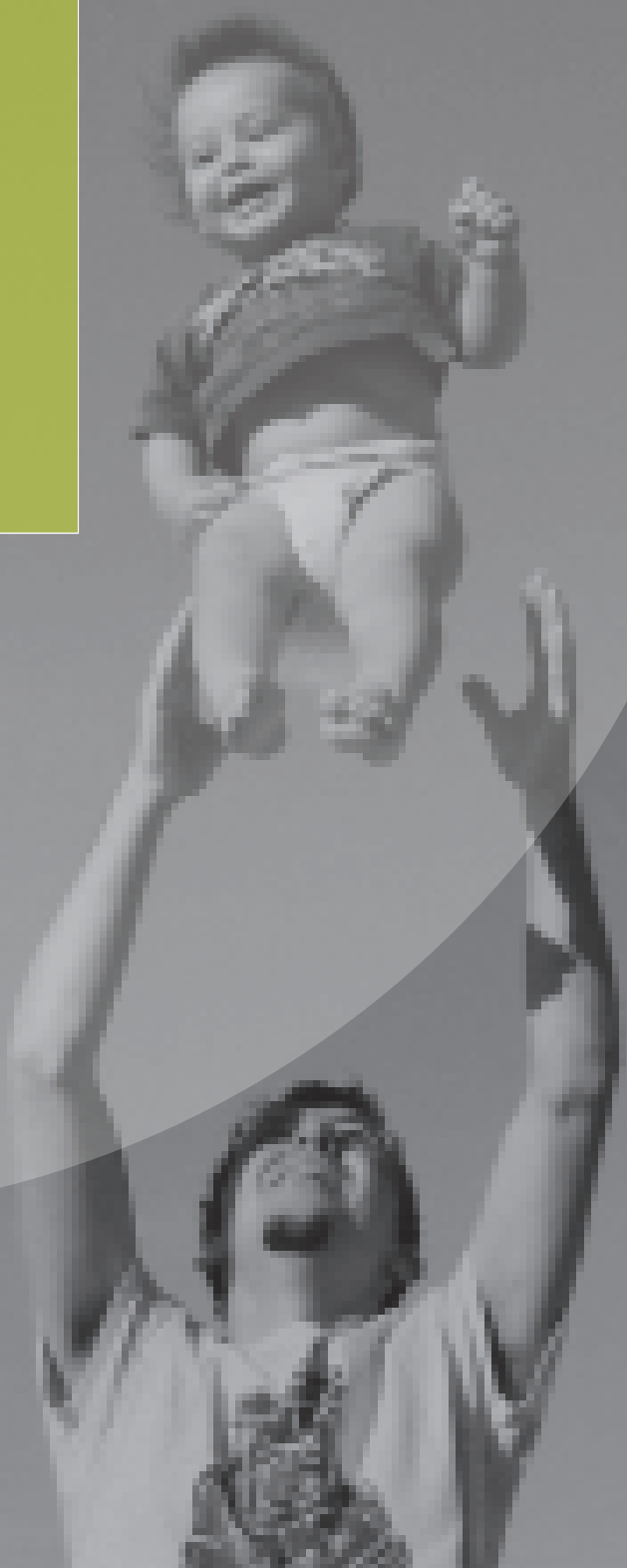
It is evidenced that students have been "lost" due to school closings in the spring of 2020, and the subsequent virtual/hybrid solutions of the fall. While TEA has not reported firm numbers as of our publication date, in October the Houston Chronicle reported enrollment numbers down 6.3% in HISD and as much as 10% down in Alief ISD.[80] At the same time, unemployment has been an immediate consequence of the pandemic, exacerbating an already difficult challenge for OYYA; the U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics recorded a 165% increase in unemployment from March 2020 (5.1%) to April 2020 (13.5%) for this specific age group. Now more than ever, community-based programs need to remain open and attentive to OYYA, so they do not fall through the cracks.

Pandemic aside, the needs of OYYA are diverse and complex. From facing the systemic issues of a broken foster care system, to navigating the unique challenges of teenage parenthood, it is crucial to understand the unique challenges that each OYYA might face. Given the implications of 2020 and its impact on this specific population, now more than ever a system of supports is needed for this group of youth and young adults.

Vision for Our Children

- OYYA have access to work-based learning experiences and apprenticeships while still in high school, to identify potential career paths.
- Employers are incentivized to hire more young adults and supported in the on-boarding techniques that are needed.
- State funds and supports are in place to coordinate programs and services specifically for OYYA.
- OYYA have access to affordable healthcare, including counseling and social services.
- Positive messaging is employed to increase awareness about youth disconnection; interventions are destigmatized across public and educational institutions and community organizations.
- OYYA are shown how to access the public and educational institutions and community organizations that can prevent them from falling through the cracks.
- More OYYA obtain high school diplomas and post-secondary degrees.

A society must protect its most vulnerable, a responsibility of which we have repeatedly fallen short.



Growing Up In Houston: Youth Vulnerability and Safety

SAFETY

PROTECTING OUR MOST VULNERABLE FROM VICTIMIZATION AND EXPLOITATION

A society must protect its most vulnerable, a responsibility of which we have repeatedly fallen short. Prevention of human trafficking, abuse, and other forms of victimization is built on a bedrock of child safety, security, and attachment. For those children who society has failed, they are often further victimized by the criminal justice and foster care system, leaving them at even greater risk of future negative outcomes.

THE STATE OF FOSTER CARE IN HARRIS COUNTY

In 2019, Child Protective Services removed 1,918 Houston-area children from their homes.[81] While many of these children will be reunited with their families, some are not, and the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) bears responsibility for 7,470 children in the Houston area,[82] or nearly 15% of the total number of Texas children in foster care.[83] Children placed in foster care are more likely to have experienced abuse, neglect, and other hardships and adverse experiences, but they continue to face these risks within the system created to protect them.[84]

DFPS reported a significant drop in reports of child abuse and neglect during April 2020 in comparison to April 2019, and that trend likely continued through the summer. Other than family members, teachers and medical staff are two of the most common reporters of child abuse, and without access to other adults and authority figures, many children may be trapped in abusive or neglectful conditions.[85] As children prepare to return to school or resume other activities, caretakers and service providers must be prepared to recognize the signs of child maltreatment.

Nearly 2,000 Texas children and 439 Harris County children ran away from their foster care placement in 2019.[86] These children are at a greater risk of falling victim to trafficking, abuse, and homelessness, and tragically, **109 children reported being victimized (46 sex trafficked, 72 sexually abused, and 19 physically abused) during the time that they were missing from care.**[87] These numbers are based on self-reports and are undoubtedly under-representative of the actual level of victimization. Children living in Residential Treatment Centers (RTCs) represent a disproportionate number of the youths who ran away, suggesting that efforts to reduce runaways should focus on the needs and challenges of children residing at those facilities.[88]

The U.S. State Department, in its annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report, highlighted that children in institutional care (e.g., RTCs) are targeted by traffickers. Congregate care often fails to provide for children's attachment and emotional needs, leaving vulnerabilities that traffickers seek to exploit.[87] The location of such facilities is often known to traffickers, and several facilities have reported traffickers recruiting children outside

SAFETY

of these facilities or sending in other children to recruit victims from within.[90] Proposed solutions to addressing these issues include establishing crime-free zones around RTCs, increasing penalties for trespassing near these facilities, and potentially lessening the requirements for individualized suspicion for law enforcement in these zones.[91]

THE NECESSITY OF DECRIMINALIZING PROSTITUTION FOR YOUTH

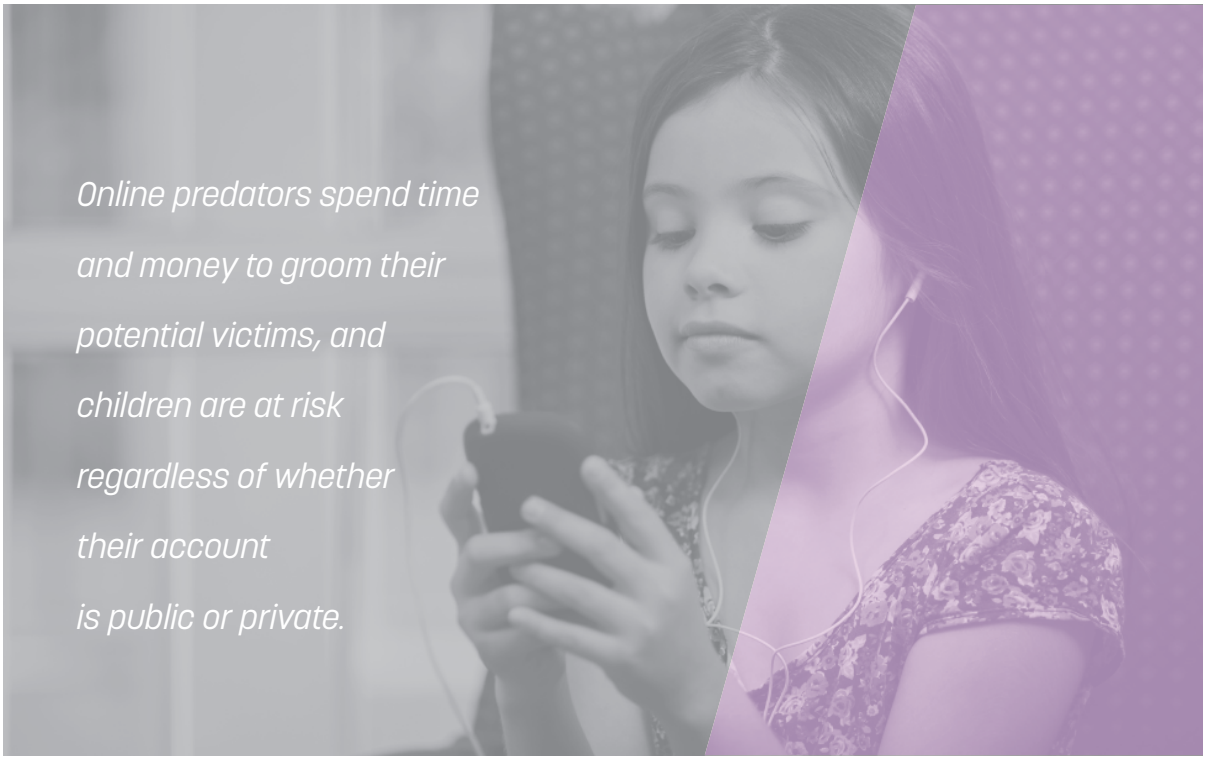
In 2019, a bill banning the prosecution of children younger than 17 years old for the crime of prostitution passed through both the Texas House and Senate. However, the bill was ultimately vetoed by Governor Abbot due to concerns that traffickers might be incentivized to traffic minors and that law enforcement would be unable to separate victims from their traffickers.[92] While arresting and charging a child may successfully separate the child from their trafficker for some time, it also revictimizes and traumatizes that child, deepens distrust of authority, and does little to solve long-term medical, housing, or mental health needs.[93] The federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 recognizes a minor's inability to give meaningful consent,[4] as does our state human trafficking statute. It is difficult to reconcile the Legislature's recognition of the special vulnerability of children with simultaneously allowing minors to be prosecuted for prostitution.[95] As of 2019, 14 states have passed legislation to protect children and youth identified as victims of sex trafficking from criminal or delinquent charges, instead providing youth victims with appropriate health services.[96] The criminal responsibility of child sex trafficking lies with the trafficker, not the victim of sexual abuse,[97] and it is imperative that Texas' laws reflect this, going further than HB 1771 to decriminalize prostitution selling for all minors.

MAINTAINING CHILD SAFETY ONLINE

Children are spending more time online because of remote learning, and cyberbullying, exposure to online predators, prevalence of pornography and ease of access to social media pose a threat to children's safety on the internet.[98,99,100] According to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children,[101] predators exploit children online through coercion methods such as using blackmail to retrieve sexual photos or videos of the child, obtain money from the child, or engage in sex with the child. Other known tactics of sexual offenders include: developing a bond with the child through a friendship or romantic relationship; pretending to be someone else; using multiple identities against a given child (ex.: demanding sexual content from the child through one identity while pretending to be a victim who is going through the same treatment through another identity);

threatening to create sexual content of the child and sharing it with friends and family members; and threatening to physically harm the child or their family members if the desired demands are not met.[102] Online predators spend time and money to groom their potential victims, and children are at risk regardless of whether their account is public or private.[103] There are many resources available for parents outlining the dangers their children face online and providing recommendations of how to best protect their children, how to engage their children in conversations about online safety, and how to determine when their child is mature enough to have access to social media.[104] Below is a list of resources for parents:

- **AUTHOR SANDY STORM:** Discusses ways for parents to engage meaningful conversation about internet safety with their children and provides education about common traits of traffickers[105]
- **PROTECT YOUNG EYES:** Write comprehensive app and device reviews for parents as well as tested recommendations for parental controls[106]
- **ENOUGH IS ENOUGH:** Provide education and age-based guidelines for internet safety to parents[107]
- **SAFEWISE:** Provides an internet safety guide for children and parents with an increased focus on how to remain safe during online learning[108]
- **CYBERTIPLINE.ORG:** Run by the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, CyberTipline is the nation's reporting system for the exploitation of children online[109]
- **SAFE ONLINE SURFING:** Offers online gaming and exams for teachers and students in 3rd through 8th grade in a secure website run by the FBI and includes monthly leadership boards of the highest scores among schools across the country - when available, the highest-earning school will receive a visit from a local FBI Special Agent[110]



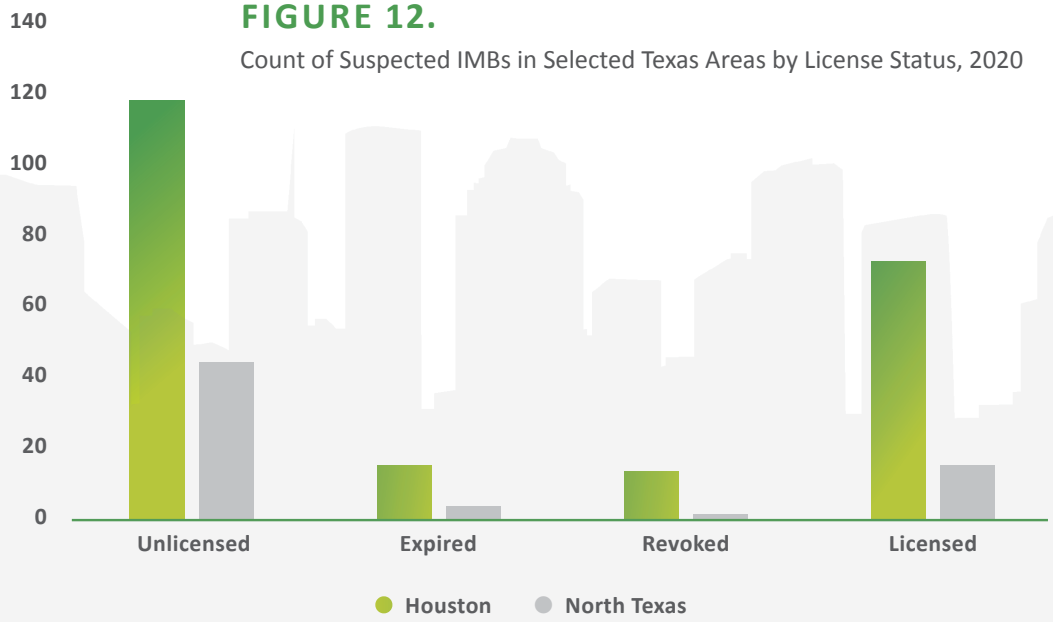
SAFETY

HOUSTON: WE HAVE AN (IMB) PROBLEM

Illicit massage businesses (IMBs) pose as legitimate massage establishments but are fronts for commercial sex operations, and IMBs traffic victims by means of force, fraud, or coercion. Love People Not Pixels collected information on over 700 suspected illicit massage businesses (SIMBs) in Texas and have identified 218 SIMBs in Houston and 63 SIMBs in North Texas.[111] (See **Figure 12**). In 2018, C@R mapped out SIMBs and their relation to public schools, identifying that over 16,000 Harris County students attend a school located within 1,000 feet of an IMB and nearly a third of all Harris County students attend a school located within a mile of an SIMB.[112] Although children are not typically trafficked or victimized within these businesses, many children will pass an SIMB on their way to school, and the presence of SIMBs in children's daily lives normalizes commercial sexual exploitation and desensitizes them to rape culture and predatory behavior.

FIGURE 12.

Count of Suspected IMBs in Selected Texas Areas by License Status, 2020



Systemic or Pandemic? The Increased Risk of Exploitation

Human traffickers exploit vulnerabilities, often targeting children with a history of sexual abuse, chronic maltreatment or neglect, unstable housing, low self-esteem, and minimal social support.[113] Following the COVID-19 pandemic, families may be further exploited due to increased economic hardship; children are also at an increased risk due to more time spent on the internet for online learning, gaming, and social media.[114,115] During the pandemic, an increasing number of individuals have attempted to access illegal websites containing child pornography or other exploitative materials.[116] As is the case with other public emergencies and natural

disasters, the COVID-19 pandemic creates additional opportunities for traffickers to recruit and victimize at-risk individuals.

CEASE (Cities Empowered Against Sexual Exploitation) Texas is a project managed by C@R and funded through the Office of the Texas Governor aimed at reducing demand for human trafficking and illicit exploitative commercial sex. C@R's research and deterrence efforts reveal that men will continue their sex purchasing behaviors despite the danger of the pandemic (See **Figure 13**). Additionally, these new "opportunities" for traffickers to recruit and victimize underscore the fundamental truth already known by CEASE Texas: If there are no buyers, there is no demand, and no demand means no victims. We cannot allow the normalization of commercial sexual exploitation to supplant a robust social safety net that addresses the vulnerabilities that lead to exploitation and victimization in the first place. The United Nations urges governments to increase initiatives to raise awareness of cyber safety and to provide local hotlines and helplines.[117] Finally, a cultural change is essential to ending the demand for commercial sexual exploitation and human trafficking, and that cultural change should start with educating young people about meaningful consent and the inequalities and vulnerabilities that lead to sexual exploitation.

Covid Chatbot Responses

FIGURE 13

Chatbot responses from buyers to decoy ads offering sex which demonstrate buyers' knowledge of the Covid-19 Pandemic

Note: These are responses received by the CEASE/C@R Chatbot during March-April 2020

Vision for Our Children

- Common first reporters of child abuse and neglect (school staff and medical staff) receive more training to deal with the projected influx of minors suffering abuse.
- The legislature requires a higher level of security around the premises of Residential Treatment Centers.
- Texas' prostitution law affirms that a minor cannot consent to selling themselves through commercial sex.
- Texas no longer has IMBs in its neighborhoods.

Growing Up In Houston: Health and Nutrition

HEALTH AND NUTRITION

Access to healthcare remains elusive in much of the Houston area and in Texas overall. Texas remains one of 14 states that has not expanded access to Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act, leaving roughly 5 million Texans without healthcare as of 2018; this represents 18% of the state's population, the highest uninsured rate in the country.[118] Out of all United States counties, Harris County has the highest number of uninsured children in 2018, with 13% of children uninsured.[119]

THE STATE OF MATERNAL & CHILD HEALTH CARE COVERAGE IN TEXAS

Health care coverage provides access to needed medical, mental, and other safety net support services, which improve maternal, infant, and child mortality, health outcomes, and overall well-being. In Harris County, 22,526 pregnant women were enrolled in Medicaid in 2019.[120] In order to ensure the best health outcomes for the child, it is recommended that expectant mothers receive 12 months of prenatal care followed by 12 months of postpartum care, which reduces risk of infant death by 25%. However, only 66% of mothers in Texas began prenatal care within the first trimester in 2018,[121,122] with white mothers making up the largest share at 74%, as seen in **Figure 14**.

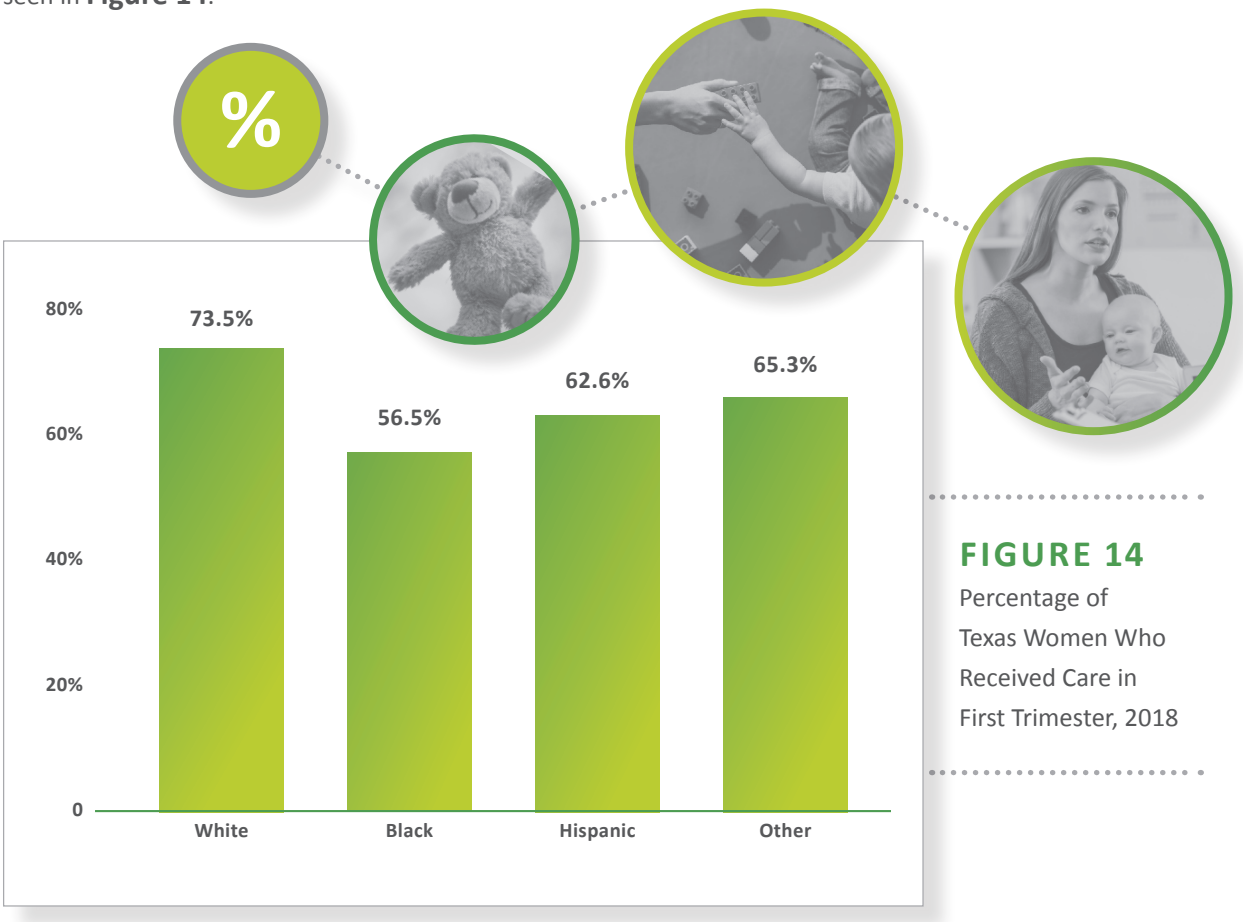


FIGURE 14
Percentage of Texas Women Who Received Care in First Trimester, 2018

HEALTH AND NUTRITION

Maintaining well-child visits enables the proper tracking of children's growth and development and the provision of recommended immunizations that protect children against disease outbreaks such as measles and pertussis. For the 2019-2020 school year, the Texas Department of State Health Services reported that 97% of kindergarten students had completed their vaccinations for measles, mumps and rubella (MMR), and 97% of kindergarten students completed their vaccinations for pertussis.[123] These numbers are relatively similar to the 2018-2019 school year. This trend must continue in order to avoid an unnecessary public health crisis, as untimely access to recommended immunizations could create an additional public health burden, reducing community health providers' overall capacity.

Despite the availability of publicly funded health care programs such as Children's Medicaid and Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP)—which provide low-cost or free health services to children—there is still a gap in health care coverage. In 2019, Harris County had 525,965 children enrolled in Children's Medicaid and 72,323 enrolled in CHIP (seen **Figure 15**) while 558,311 children are eligible for Medicaid and 56,363 are eligible for CHIP.[124] However, many families struggle to maintain coverage under Medicaid. While children enrolled in CHIP are automatically eligible to receive coverage for 12 months, families enrolled in Medicaid are eligible to receive coverage for only 6 months. After this, they are then subject to a financial review every month thereafter to qualify, burdening low-income families with constant paperwork. Furthermore, this burden is unnecessary because schools already have access to families' information via their qualification for other state programs (i.e. SNAP). Improved access to quality healthcare services has implications beyond health, including positive long-term educational, parenting, and economic outcomes for children and families.

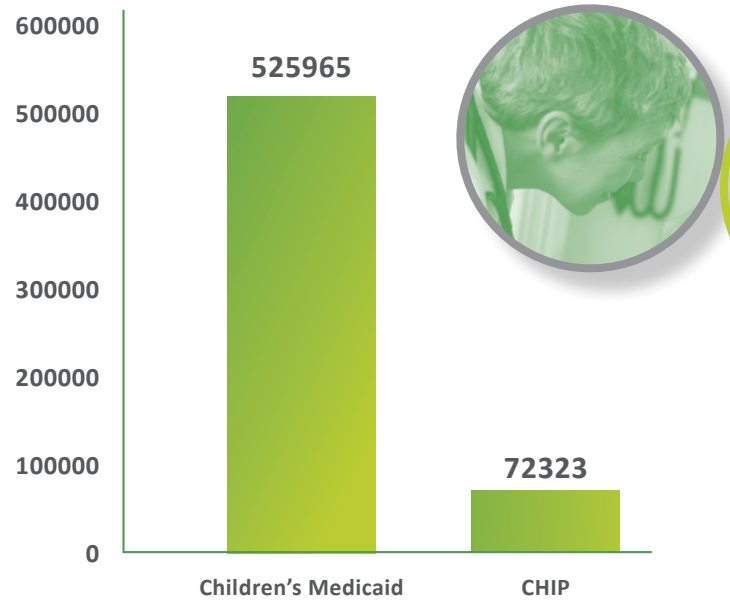


FIGURE 15
Harris County Children's Medicaid and CHIP Caseload, 2019

THE IMPACT OF CHILD HUNGER

HEALTH AND NUTRITION

A lack of access to healthy, nutritious meals already posed a threat to child health in Texas prior to COVID-19. Like many other support and referral systems that flowed through schools, the pandemic has made certain disparities in child food insecurity worse. Policies enacted in response to this health crisis provide opportunities to build a path forward that would ensure all children in Texas gain consistent access to the food and nutrition they need.

As shown in **Figure 16**, in 2018, prior to the pandemic, approximately 1 in 4 children in Harris County lived in food insecure households, a percentage comparable to the Texas rate of 22% and exceeding the United States rate of 13.9 %.[125,126]

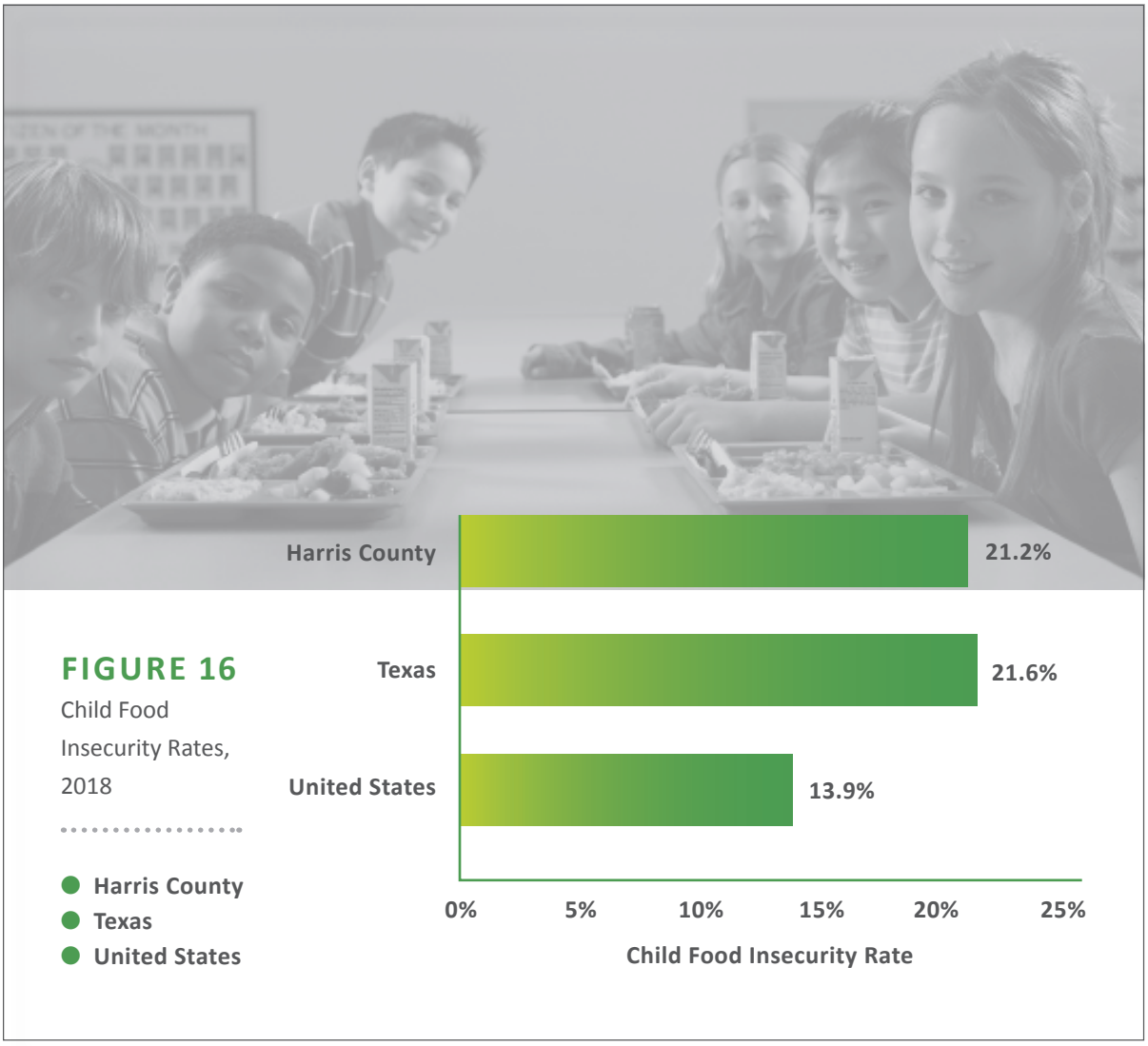


FIGURE 16
Child Food Insecurity Rates, 2018

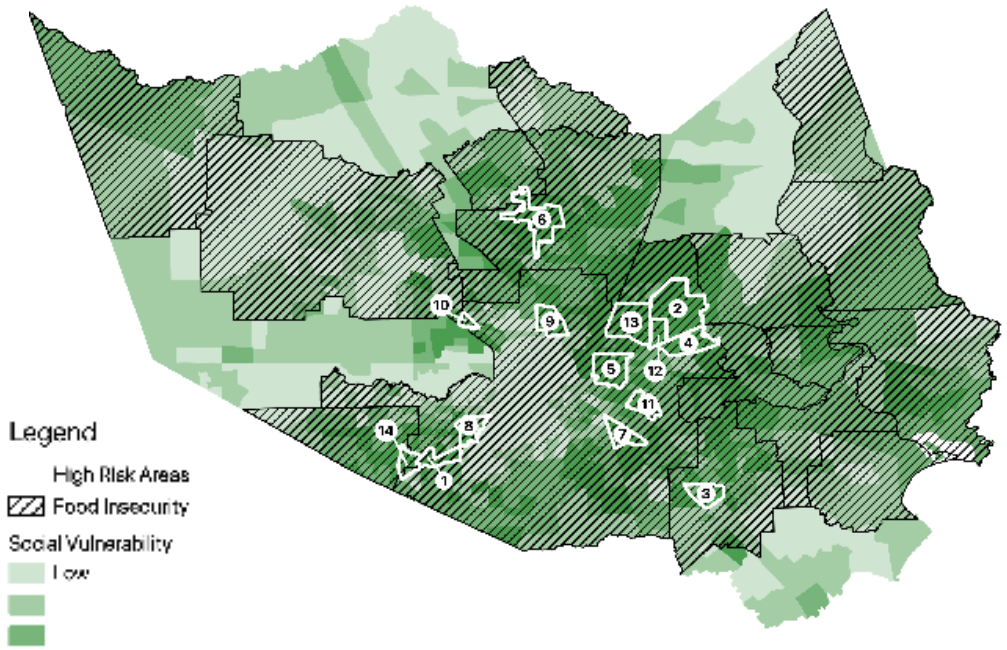
Note. The USDA defines food security in a household as, "access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life." Children living in households that lack access, at times, to enough food for an active, healthy life for all members in their household are considered food insecure children.

HEALTH AND NUTRITION

Systemic or Pandemic? Child Access to School Meals in Socially Vulnerable Food Deserts

As **Figure 17** shows, many of the communities across Harris County with the highest proportion of socially vulnerable individuals are also located in food deserts.[127,128] The map below uses the Centers for Disease Control's Social Vulnerability Index (SVI), an indicator of vulnerability during a crisis. The darkest green shows the highest concentration of most vulnerable people. This index includes socio-economic status, household composition and disability status, minority/ language status, and housing and transportation status.

FIGURE 17 Food Insecurity and Social Vulnerability, 2019



1. BRAEBURN
2. EAST HOUSTON
3. EDGEBROOK AREA
4. EL DORADO / OATES PRAIRIE
5. GREATER FIFTH WARD
6. GREATER GREENSPOINT
7. GULFGATE RIVERVIEW / PINE VALLEY
8. GULFTON
9. INDEPENDENCE HEIGHTS
10. LANGWOOD
11. MAGNOLIA PARK
12. SETTEGAST
13. TRINITY / HOUSTON GARDENS
14. WESTWOOD

Prior to the pandemic, policies designed to reduce child food insecurity and increase child access to healthy and nutritious meals included the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Program, the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), and school and summer meal programs. Policy shifts resulting from the pandemic have either expanded these existing programs or waived

program requirements, while also introducing temporary new programs, such as the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer, and these changes present opportunities for reducing child food insecurity in the future.

While each of these programs contributes to the reduction of child food insecurity in Texas, many eligible individuals and institutions do not participate in these programs because of stigmas and regulatory burdens. For example, SNAP, the largest government program in the food safety net, helps low-income families buy nutritious food from local food stores.[129] Across the state of Texas, SNAP helps to feed 550,790 children under age 5 and 1,288,049 children age 5 and older on average each month, with **79 % of SNAP recipients statewide living in families with children.**[130,131] **Despite the scope of children reached through SNAP, as recent as 2016, over 1 in 5 Houstonians were eligible, but not enrolled, in SNAP, with each SNAP dollar not spent by these individuals costing Houston approximately $1.80 in estimated economic activity.**[132,133] While innovations are being piloted, there is a danger that the innovations will be treated as episodical, and long-term value to increasing access to programs, like SNAP, could go unrealized.

One innovation that has been available, but underutilized, is the federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP).[134] CEP allows schools and school districts in low-income areas the ability to serve breakfast and lunch at no cost to all enrolled students through formula-based school meal reimbursements tied to student participation in means-tested programs such as SNAP. CEP significantly reduces administrative burdens on schools associated with collecting household school meal applications and provides all students within a school or district access to free breakfast and lunch.[135] As shown in **Figure 18**, currently in Texas, 3,250 of the 6,578 CEP eligible or near-eligible schools are enrolled in CEP, meaning over half of eligible or near eligible schools in Texas are not taking advantage of this opportunity to increase child access to healthy and nutritious meals, a rate below the national average in terms of CEP participation.[136] CEP should be a priority for expansion because it increases participation in school meal programs, reduces administrative effort, and removes the stigma of accessing free school meals since meals are available for all students.[137]

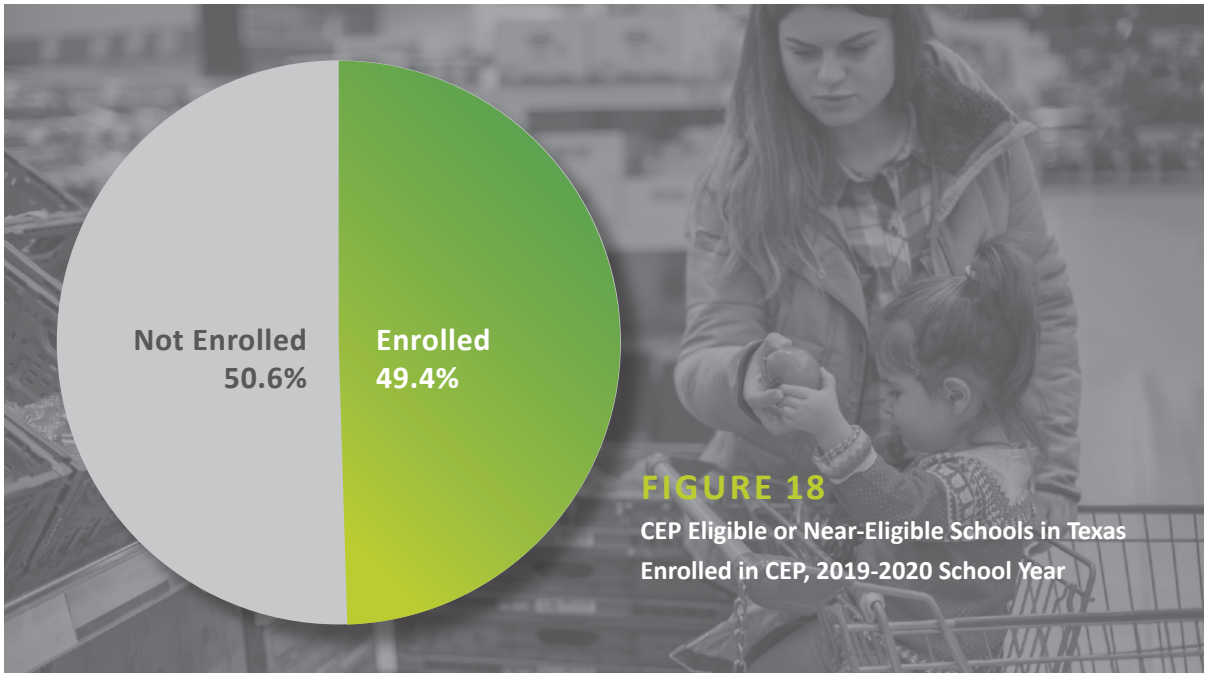


FIGURE 18
CEP Eligible or Near-Eligible Schools in Texas Enrolled in CEP, 2019-2020 School Year

One policy that offers hope is the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer, or P-EBT. P-EBT is a program established by the United States Department of Agriculture and administered by Texas Health and Human Services in response to COVID-19; this program allows families with children that have temporarily lost access to free or reduced-price school meals to receive a one-time $285 electronic payment to purchase food.[138] Payments are disbursed either automatically on SNAP Lone Star Cards for SNAP recipients or a food debit card mailed to non-SNAP recipients. The money is to be used to purchase meals during school closures and follows the same SNAP spending guidelines. Also, in CEP districts, 100 % of students are eligible for P-EBT electronic payments. As of July 2020,[139] **3,062,349 children across the state of Texas were automatically sent or applied for P-EBT benefits, a number proportional to 83.9 % of the low income, free or reduced-price school meal eligible children across the state.**[140] The P-EBT program has increased participation and reduced barriers, such as transportation to physical meal pick-up locations, and P-EBT provides a potential model for restructuring summer meal programs even outside of the context of a pandemic.[141]

Vision for Our Children

- All of Houston's children and families have access to nutritious meals through SNAP, CEP, and P-EBT expansion; the process is simplified to support increased participation.
- All Houston families, regardless of status, have access to quality health care through Medicaid.
- All Houston families, regardless of status, have access to mental health and socio-emotional support.
- Houston parents have the healthcare they need to provide critical support to their children.

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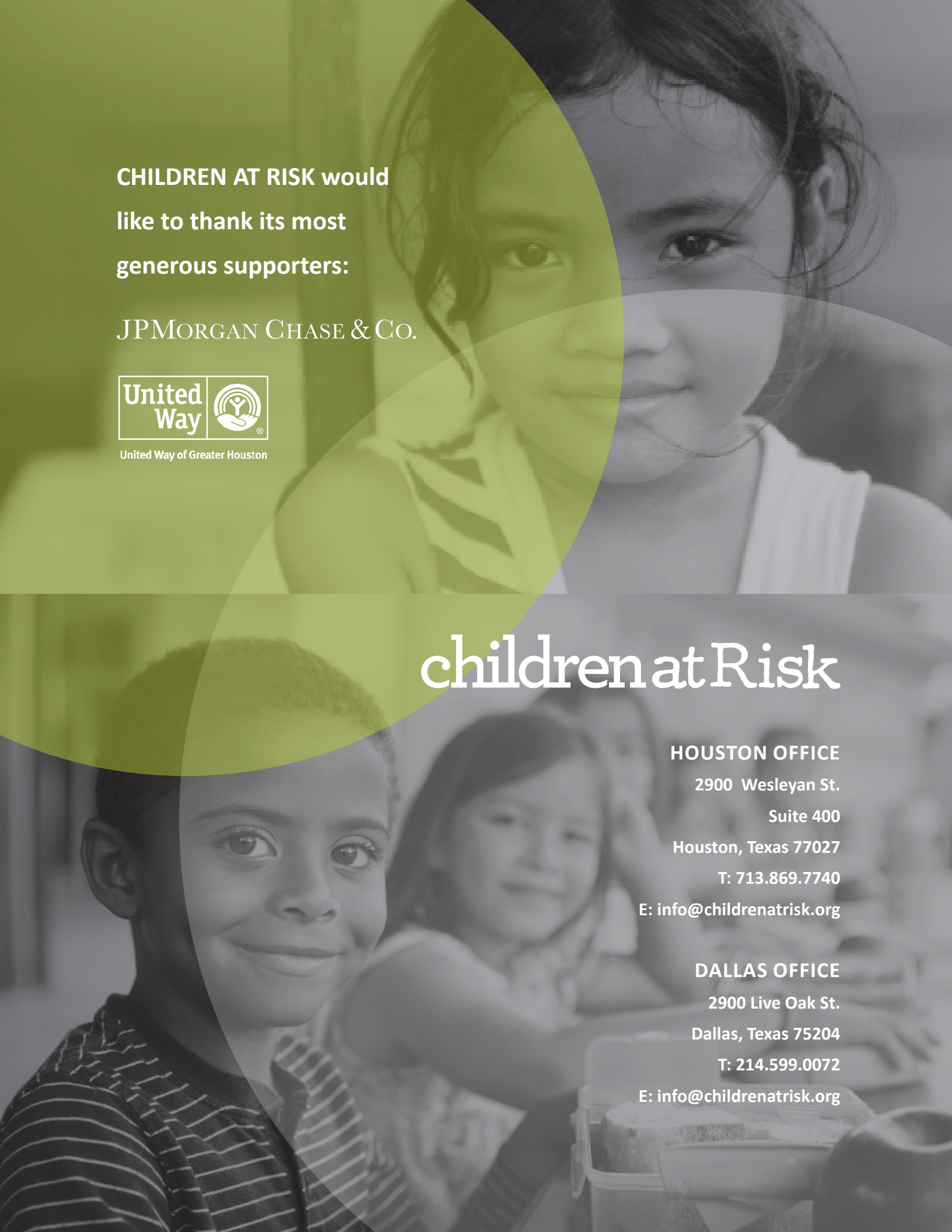
Research & data without action are not enough.

CHILDREN AT RISK leverages its expertise to educate policymakers and advocate for policies that improve the lives of children.



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