GROWING UP IN HOUSTON

ASSESSING THE QUALITY OF LIFE OF OUR CHILDREN

children at Risk

Speaking Out + Driving Change for Children

2022-2023

17th Edition

GROWING UP IN HOUSTON

Authors
Bob Sanborn, Ed.D- *President & CEO*
Kim Parker, MSW, MSPH- *Chief Program Officer*
Kim Kofron, M.Ed- *Senior Director of Education*
Caroline Roberts, JD- *Senior Staff Attorney*
Leila Mzali, M.Ed- *Director of Center for Social Measurement and Evaluation (CSME)*
Kaitlyn Newell, M.Ed- *Associate Director of Early Childhood Education*
Christine Thomas, MS- *Sr. Associate Director of CSME*
Lauren Biegel- *Assistant Director of Programs*
Claire Dutreix - *Assistant Director of K-12 Education*
Neomi Fletcher- *Assistant Director of Early Childhood Education*
Rebecca Quintanilla- *Project Coordinator*
Amy Shuff, BA- *Data Communications Fellow*

Editors
Gretchen Himsl, MPAff- *Chief of Staff*
Charanya Ravikumar- *Chief Strategy Officer*
Caroline Roberts, JD- *Senior Staff Attorney*
Jennifer Sudkamp- *Sr. Associate Director of Development*
Erika Alcala- *Project Coordinator*

Designed By:
Lauren Biegel- *Assistant Director of Programs*

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Message from the CEO

To chart the path forward for Houston's kids, we must begin with an understanding of where we are. Data must be the catalyst for any conversation regarding the well-being of our children. However, data alone is not sufficient. We must also overlay context to better understand the complexities of the many issues facing our children. *Growing Up in Houston* aims to do just that. As President and CEO of CHILDREN AT RISK, I want to welcome you to the seventeenth edition of *Growing Up in Houston: Assessing the Quality of Life of our Children* (GUIH).

In partnership with the United Way of Greater Houston and many others over the years, we are pleased to present you with this publication, providing a glimpse into the status of Houston's children. This publication is intended to inform stakeholders and policy makers on the challenges facing our children as well as the opportunities that are available to make the greatest impact. We believe this publication provides invaluable insight which is crucial for progress.

Since our last edition, families, schools, and communities have been working to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic while many of the COVID-era supports have ended. As parents return to in-person work and students return to physical classrooms, many are bringing challenges that did not exist beforehand: months of insecure employment, formula shortages, inflation, and new trauma, to name a few. The purpose of this report is not only to emphasize these challenges, but also to highlight the ingenuity and resilience of our children and communities as well as opportunities to rebuild stronger.

Our approach is centered on the whole child, recognizing that no part of development happens in a vacuum, but rather that children live in an ecosystem. This year's Growing Up in Houston addresses the following:

- Houston's Changing Demographics
- Early Childhood Education
- K-12 Education
- Opportunity Youth and Young Adults
- Health

Throughout these sections, we strive to highlight inequities, unique barriers, and experiences for immigrant populations. We also outline a path forward featuring policy recommendations that would promote well-being for children, families, and communities in Houston.

If we were to give Houston a grade for how well we are responding to the needs of Houston's children, Houston would receive a D with a B for optimism. We still have a long way to go to ensure that our children have their basic needs met and are being given opportunities to learn and grow

into their future selves. However, progress is being made and there is hope for the future.

At CHILDREN AT RISK, we believe the needs of our children should be the highest priority. Our hope is that all individuals – from public officials to parents and educators – can gain a solid understanding of the status of Houston's children and commit to continued progress for a better future.

For Children!

Robert Sanborn, President and CEO, CHILDREN AT RISK

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Demographics

The population of Harris County was estimated to be around 4.7 million in 2021, a 17% increase from the 4 million who lived there in 2011.[1] In comparison, the United States population grew 7% and Texas as a state grew 13% during the same time period. Harris County has continuously increased its annual population over the last ten years.[2] Between 2011 and 2020, the county grew by an average of 1.7% per year. As the population of the Greater Houston area continues to grow alongside the rest of Texas, the importance of supporting children and families in accessing their needs becomes paramount.

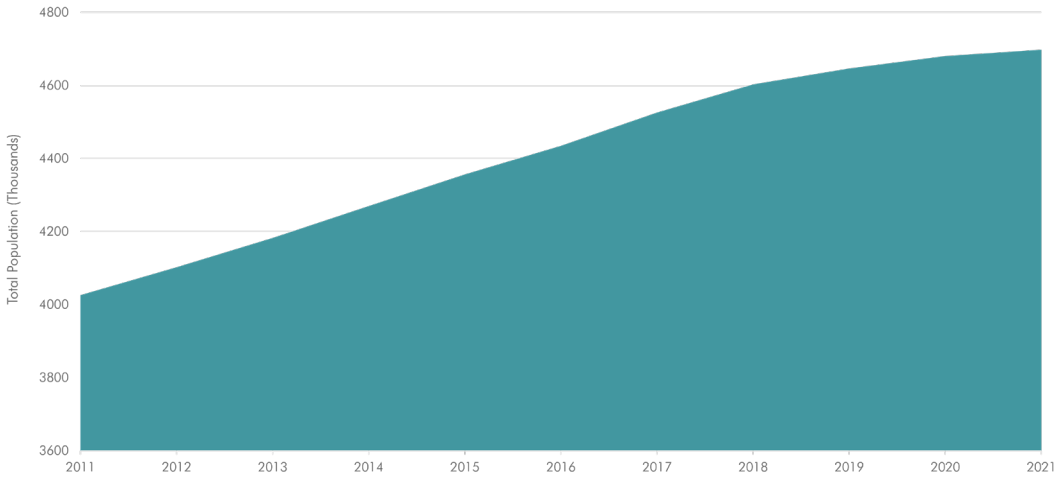


Figure 1. Total population by year in Harris County, 2011-2020[i]

Census data shows that Harris County has had a significant increase in child population since 2020. Harris County has an estimated child population of 1,189,013, just shy of the entire population of Dallas.[3]

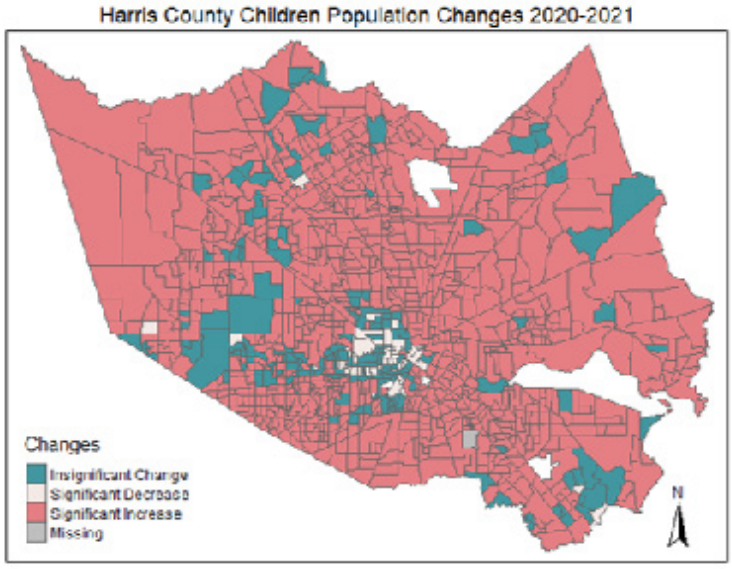


Figure 2. Map of Child Population Changes[ii]

What does this mean for Houston and Harris County?

Neighborhood location matters when it comes to health and longevity.[4] Some neighborhoods provide better access to goods, resources and opportunities compared to others. After more than two years of hardships inflicted by the COVID-19 pandemic, communities across the United States and Texas continue to struggle with

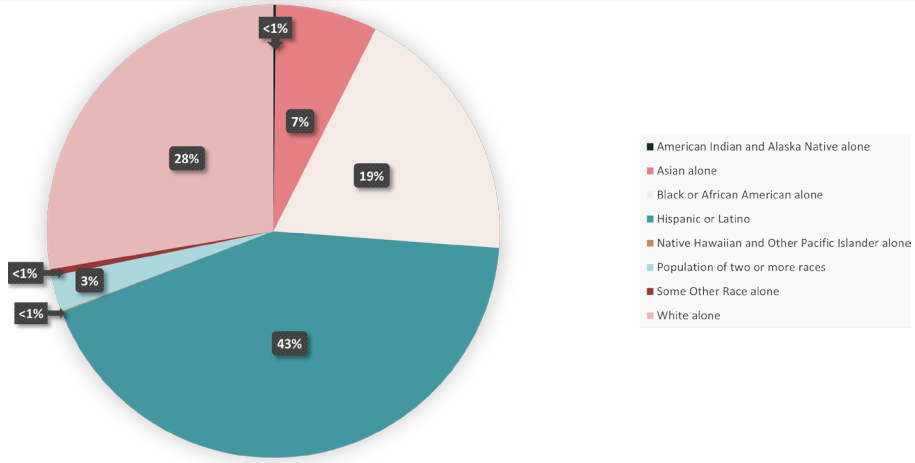


Figure 3. Race and Ethnicity Breakdown in Harris County, 2021[iii]

access to resources and supports for their communities.

This report focuses on children aged 0-17 years who reside in Harris County. The purpose of the report is to provide stakeholders in our children's future with an easily comprehensible description of the state of well-being of children and their families living in Harris County.

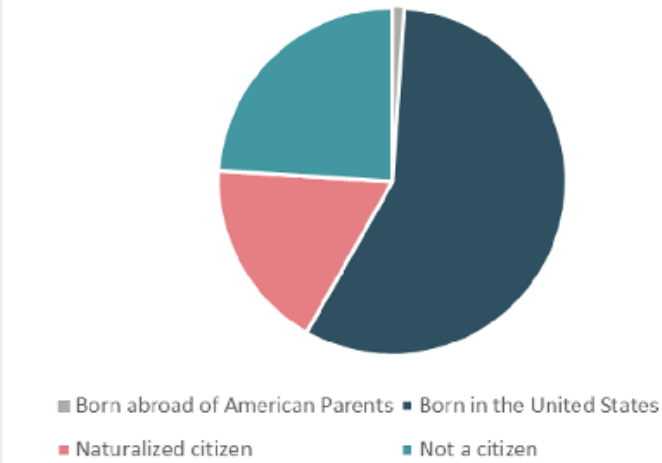


Figure 4. Citizenship Status of Families in Harris County [iv]

The decision to expand to the greater Harris County area instead of focusing solely on the city of Houston is in response to the continued sprawl of the urban limits into the suburbs. Many would agree that it's becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish some suburban neighborhoods from a central city neighborhood.

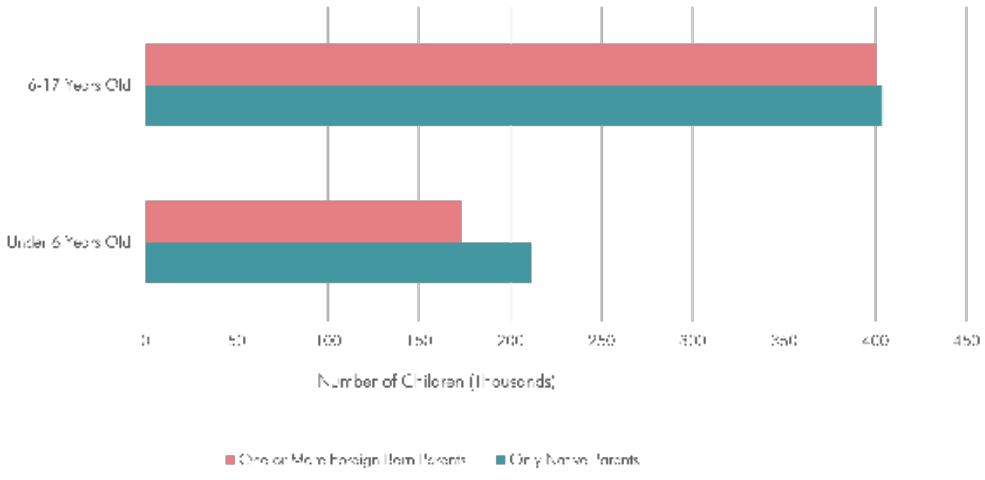


Figure 5. Number of Children by Nativity of Parents in Harris County[v]

Harris County Race and Ethnicity

In 2020, non-Hispanic white Harris County residents made up 27.7% of the population compared to 32.6% in 2011.[5] Between 2011 and 2020, the share of the population that is Hispanic/Latino grew the most, increasing 3.2 percentage points to 44.4%.[6] The non-Hispanic white population had the largest decrease dropping 4.9 percentage points to 27.7%.[7]

Today, suburbs contain a more diverse population in terms of race and ethnicity with people of African, Asian and Hispanic ancestry increasingly represented. For this report we include various racial categories as reported out by Texas state agencies, along with the Hispanic category for ethnicity. We acknowledge that race classifications were created for the purpose of a racial hierarchy which justified the concept of race discrimination (restriction of legal, social, moral and economic authorities).[8,9,10] Unfortunately, race continues to be tied to racial discrimination and racism in our laws, policies and social practices that in turn lead to racial disparities in overall outcomes.[11] We use racial/ethnic (along with other forms of demographic data) categories to identify possible inequities. "When data are unavailable for a marginalized racial/ethnic group, their needs are rendered invisible when policies are made, resources are allocated, and programs are designed and implemented."[12]

Understanding and interpreting reports of racial and ethnic identity are often inconsistent due to the limitations within data collection practices. For example, there was no consistent statistical record allowing people to check more than one race before 2000. While the United States is often referred to as the "melting pot" of races, most people still report a single race identity.[13] Social or personal identities of race, ethnicity, culture and nationality do have an impact on access to various resources that support overall well-being. The complexity and confusion of race and ethnicity exist within our own practices, methods and use of language, which may lead to differences in data collection. In order to improve outcomes across race/ethnicity standardization, collaboration and transparency around research and data collection is needed.

In Harris County, we see more immigrant families in extreme poverty as compared to families who were born in the United States.

Defining Immigrant Children

The U.S. Census Bureau defines immigrant children as those born outside of the United States, but the reality is that few children become part of the United States population by moving here; most become part of the United States population by being born with the United States. As of 2022 only 7.6% of children living in Harris County were born outside of the United States.[14] CHILDREN AT RISK defines immigrant children as all first- and second- generation immigrant children, including those in mixed status households, with temporary protected status, and undocumented children.

This is a diverse group of children who face numerous challenges ranging from language access, mobility, access to social support networks, and educational support. Even though children with at least one foreign-born parent are more likely to live with two married parents, tougher immigration

laws and increased deportations have led to the separation of parents and children.[15] Children born in the United States may be separated from parents through deportation and detention and are faced with living with a single parent or with neither parent. Children separated from parents through incarceration or deportation experience psychological trauma, higher rates of poverty and housing instability.[16] In Harris County, we see more immigrant families in extreme poverty as compared to families who were born in the United States. Extreme poverty in this graph is defined as income more than 2x below the poverty rate. Poverty thresholds vary by size of family; in 2021, the poverty threshold for a family of three was an annual income of $28,811.[17] Extreme poverty in this case would be a family of three with an annual income of $14,405 or less.

Because immigrant children and their families are a diverse group with unique needs, we highlight necessary interventions needed to support children from all backgrounds throughout this report, with particular attention paid to marginalized children and families. We also take care to highlight areas where data is not available but would be necessary to fully understand and advance the needs of all Houston's children.

EDUCATION

The Early Childhood Experience

The earliest years of a child's life are vitally important. Over 80% of a child's brain development occurs in the first 1,000 days, or 3 years, of a child's life.[18] Thus, ensuring that children have high quality education and care environments during these key developmental years is essential to setting children up for success in the longer term. For immigrant children facing additional obstacles, early childhood programs can provide a degree of stability. Despite the multitude of benefits that these programs have on a child's development, many families are unable to access these programs due to the 'chilling effect': the tendency for some families to avoid seeking resources for fear of recourse, such as deportation. Many families may be concerned that sharing their personal information and participating in publicly funded programs could have an impact.[19]

Babies and young children need supportive relationships and positive learning experiences, both at home and in their early care and education environments.[20] Investment in social policies and programs that support positive early childhood experiences for young children and their families is an incredibly effective way to support the long-term health and well-being of communities.[21] Families in Houston and across the state need support to be able to provide caring, safe, and economically secure environments for their children, and children need high-quality care and learning environments when in care or school outside the home.

Access to Affordable, High-Quality Care

Young children and families in Houston are facing similar problems as families across the state: high-quality child care is inaccessible and unaffordable. There are 326,484 children under the age of 5 in Harris County.[22] However, there are only 147,636 child care seats available.[23] In fact, there are 47 zip codes (US Census ZCTAs) within Harris county alone which qualify as child care deserts, which are defined as areas where there are at least 30 children, ages 0-5, and the demand for child care is 3x greater or more than the supply.[24] For every 100 children with working parents, there are only 61.9 child care seats available in Harris County.[25]

Families in Houston and across the state need support to be able to provide caring, safe, and economically secure environments for their children, and children need high-quality care and learning environments when in care or school outside the home.

Unfortunately, low-income families are most affected by these child care shortages in the Houston community. Many families rely on child care subsidies, administered through the Texas Workforce Commission, to make child care affordable and allow parents to work and participate in the Texas economy. Only families whose income is less than 85% of the state median income qualify for child care subsidies, and only 14% of eligible children under age 6 actually receive subsidized child

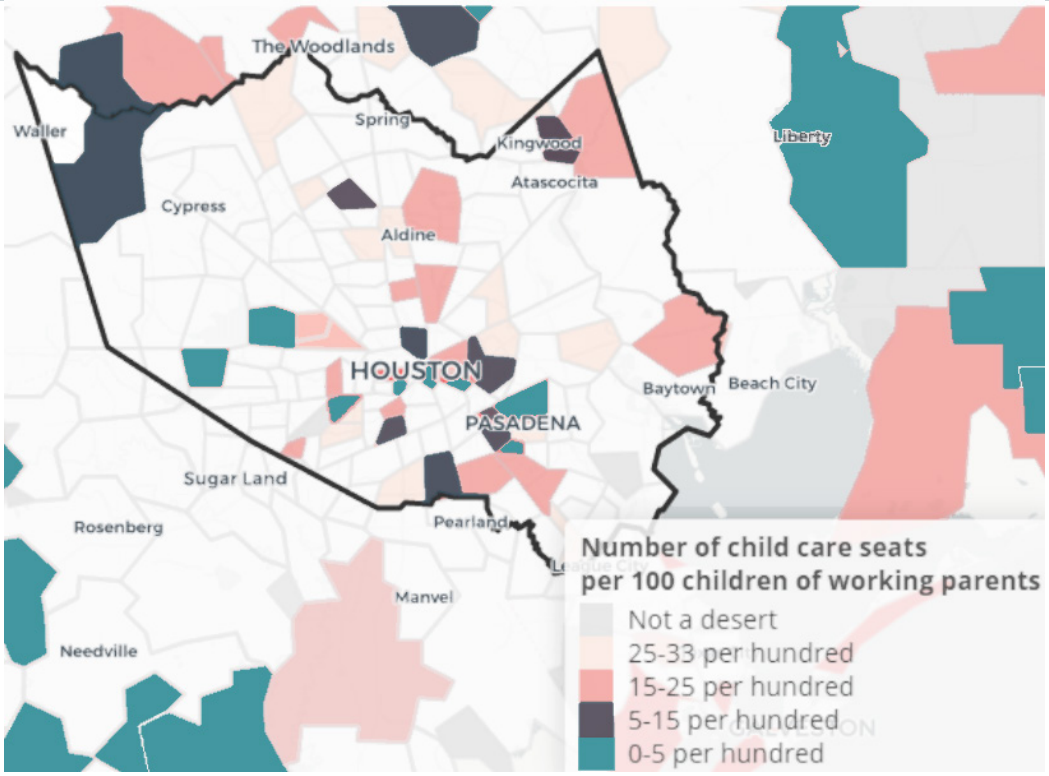


Figure 6. Child Care Desert Map, Houston[vi]

care.[26] In Harris County, this means that there are only 31.4 child care seats available per every 100 children with working parents living in low-income families.[27] Families who can't find child care may struggle to be able to work, which hurts families by depriving them of the income they need to support their children. Moreover, the lack of robust child care infrastructure in Texas may be costing the state and Texas employers as much as 9.39 billion dollars every year.[28]

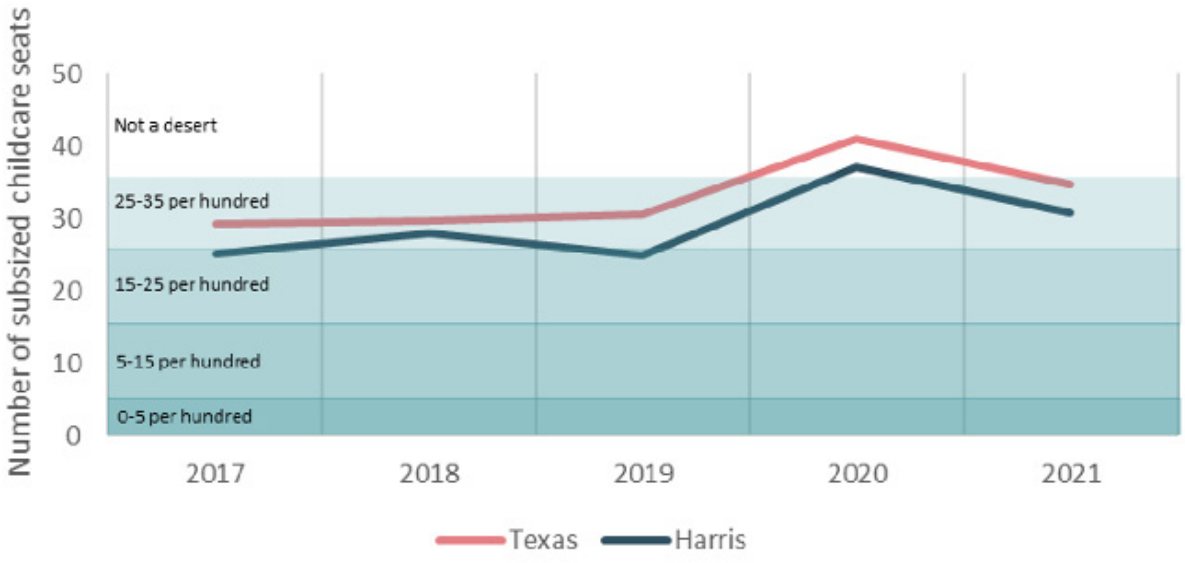


Figure 7. Subsidized Child Care Seats per 100 children of low-income, working parents[vii]

Early Childhood Educators

Our earliest learners need qualified teachers to provide safe care that will support school readiness in kindergarten. Prior to the pandemic, early childhood educators were earning poverty-level wages with 56% of educators in Texas qualifying for at least one form of public assistance, earning on average $20,300 annually.[29] For the past two years, Texas early childhood educators have worked heroically to keep the Texas economy open by providing safe, educational care for the working families across the state. However, the early childhood education field is in crisis – approximately 10% of the ECE workforce has been lost since the start of the COVID-19 crisis.[30] Most teachers (73%) reported that compensation played a role in their decision to leave their programs.[31] Without a stable workforce, children will not have access to the early learning experiences they need to be ready for school, and their parents will have limited care options that allow them to participate in the labor economy.

56% of early childhood educators in Texas qualify for at least one form of public assistance

Federal grant funding during the COVID-19 crisis helped stabilize Texas' child care infrastructure which had been stressed to the limit before the pandemic. In fact, federal grant funding has allowed providers to invest in retaining and recruiting teachers, raise quality for children, and attempt to keep costs bearable for families. However, these funds will run out in 2023 and child care providers will have to face some difficult decisions that will not only affect their business and employees, but the entire workforce.

Without state investment, child care providers will face limited choices:

1) Raise tuition prices for families who are already paying 10-50% of their income for child care
2) Slash child care workers' wages, which will exacerbate the current staffing crisis, and lead to reduced supply of child care in communities across the state, OR
3) Close their programs entirely.

Any or all of these choices will drastically hurt families, children, and businesses across the state. These effects will be far-reaching, as almost 11,000 child care providers have accepted stabilization grants in 2022.[32] Priority programs, such as those serving infants and toddlers and those operating in child care deserts are most at risk of closure, due to the high cost of serving our youngest children and the inability of providers to raise tuition in low-income areas. Without immediate funding over the next two years, many of these necessary programs will close long before any long-term solutions can be implemented. Children, families, and businesses will all suffer if the bedrock child care infrastructure fails in communities across the state.

The Path Forward - Early Childhood Education

In June 2022, Harris County made a landmark $48 million dollar investment in high-quality early childhood education that will greatly benefit children and families throughout the Houston metropolitan area.[33] The Brighter Future for Harris County Kids initiative has continued to gain funding and so far represents the largest known investment of the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA).[34] These efforts are much needed, and will help ensure that many families across the city who would otherwise struggle to access child care can access an early childhood experience that is safe, high-quality, and will help prepare their children for success throughout their lives.

However, despite strong local investments, the state of Texas is currently choosing not to invest in vital child care infrastructure that would support children, working families, and Texas businesses. During this legislative session, Texas legislators will be deciding how to spend an estimated 27 billion dollar surplus.[35] We must invest in early childhood education and care, so that providers can hire and retain staff and increase child care supply without raising costs to families.

Children under 5 represent 6.5% of the Texas population.[36] Investing at least 6.5% of the available surplus in young children and their families would dramatically strengthen Texas communities, Texas businesses, and our economy. We urge the Houston community to contact their elected officials to emphasize the importance of investing in the child care infrastructure. Even with current local investments in Harris County, we both state and federal dollars to create a consistent and sustainable change for children and families, both in Houston and across our state.

The Texas Legislature should:

- Offer retention bonuses to early childhood educators to support the workforce and increase child care supply.
- Invest directly in child care providers through foundational grant funding that prioritizes programs offering child care in child care deserts, infant & toddler care, and programs that are offering high-quality care (as evidenced by their participation in the Texas Rising Star Quality Rating System).
- Modernize child care subsidy reimbursement rates to more accurately reflect the true cost of providing safe, educational care.
- Continue to invest in Pre-K Partnerships between child care providers and local education agencies (LEAs) and alleviate barriers that prevent public-private partnerships.

K-12 Education

Schools are critical institutions for the academic and developmental growth of children and the Greater Houston area serves over 1,856,000 children across 25 public school districts. It is imperative to look at schools through a holistic lens, evaluating the many measures and systems schools put in place to provide their students with a safe, sustainable, high-quality and equitable education. In this section we evaluate data that showcases high-performing, high-poverty schools, and highlight opportunities for improvement.
For Houston to stand as an educational leader, the city must prioritize strategies to:

- Aid all students in academic achievement
- Invest in mental health resources
- Combat chronic absenteeism
- Invest in quality bilingual educational programs,
- Recruit and retain a diverse and high-quality teacher workforce and
- Invest in STEM programs.

In this section, CHILDREN AT RISK used the most updated Texas Education Agency data for the 25 ISDs that fall within the Harris County boundary, as shown below.

25 Harris County School Districts

Aldine ISD
Alief ISD
Channelview ISD
Clear Creek ISD
Crosby ISD
Cypress-Fairbanks ISD
Dayton ISD
Deer Park ISD
Galena Park ISD
Goose Creek ISD
Houston ISD
Huffman ISD
Humble ISD
Katy ISD
Klein ISD
La Porte ISD
New Caney ISD
Pasadena ISD
Pearland ISD
Sheldon ISD
Spring Branch ISD
Spring ISD
Stafford MSD
Tomball ISD
Waller ISD

Academic Achievement and Opportunity

Quality early education lays the foundation for positive student outcomes that continue through high school graduation. As our students continue to recover from pandemic learning loss, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) provides a national landscape of how each state is progressing. On the 2022 NAEP, or the "Nation's Report Card," Texas demonstrated higher rates of learning recovery compared to other states, showing lower drops in fourth and eighth grade reading scores, with fourth grade scores only dropping from 216 in 2019 to 214 in 2022, and eighth grade reading averages dropping from 256 in 2019 to 255 in 2022.[37] Math, however, saw stronger declines as Texas fourth grade math averages fell from 244 to 239 and Texas eighth grade math fell from 280 to 273. These results emphasize a need for more resources provided to schools in order to properly meet student needs for success.

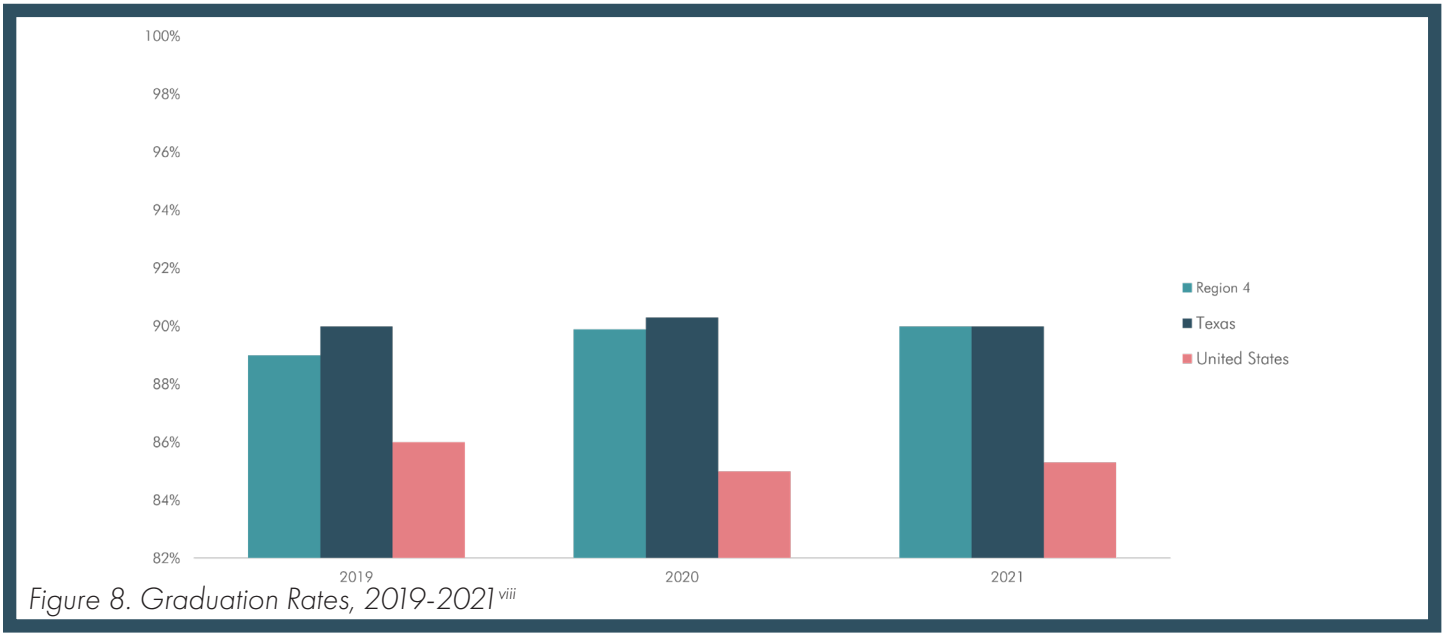


Figure 8. Graduation Rates, 2019-2021[viii]

The four-year longitudinal graduation rate for the Class of 2021 in Region 4 was 90.0%, with a 5.9% dropout rate.[38] Dropping out of high school has lasting consequences and can be combatted by looking at the early stages of a students' learning. The 5.9% or 5,200 students who did drop out of school are vulnerable to negative individual and social consequences. Studies show that dropout rates are not predominately a result of a learning difficulty or conduct problem, but rather a challenge outside of school.[39] Adolescents are at an increased risk of dropout the first few months following exposure to a severe stressor.[40] Studies show that trends that drive a student to dropout fall into three main categories: school-related, family-related, and employment-related factors.[41] HISD dropout rates have declined from 13.6% in the 2018-2019 school year to 10.5 % in the 2020-2021 school year. In HISD, dropout rates decline as leaders oversee district-wide efforts to standardize the process of screening for students who are struggling and putting interventions in place for those students.[42] Interventions included extra tutoring targeted toward students who are not performing at grade level, free meals, and more school counselors. More data is needed to see how these efforts can be reproduced to mitigate dropout rates.

Students in Texas public schools take the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) every spring. As shown in Figures 9 and 10, there is a statewide increase in math and reading exam scores from 2021, though many students are still far from meeting grade level.[43] In evaluating STAAR assessment data from 2022, economically disadvantaged students experienced more than double the amount of learning loss than their non-economically disadvantaged peers.[44] Though both groups saw improvements, achievement gaps persist. For non-economically disadvantaged students, 67% met grade level or above on RLA exam and 55% met grade level or above for math exam. In contrast, 41% of economically disadvantaged students met grade level or above for RLA exam and 30% met grade level or above for math exam. Similar trends existed when evaluating Limited English Proficiency (LEP) status students and Non-LEP status students, with LEP students experiencing significantly greater learning loss than peers.

Figure 9. Statewide STAAR Literacy Scores, 2019-2022[ix]

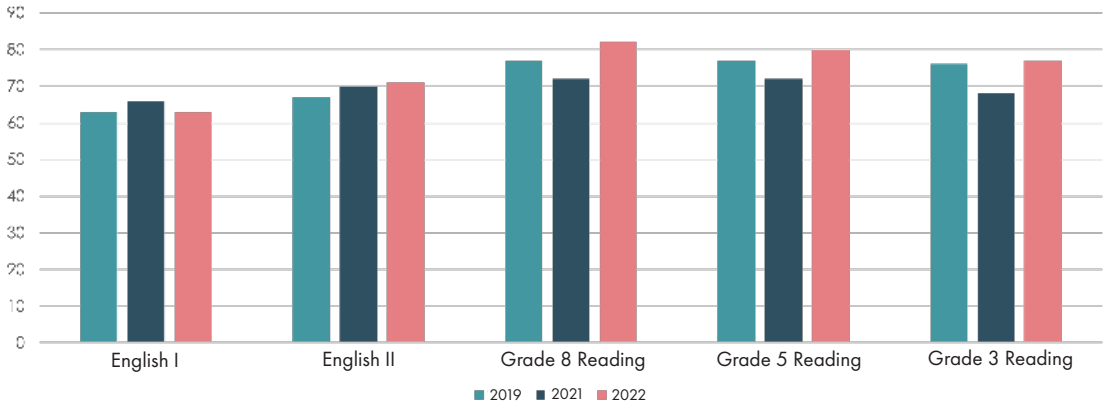
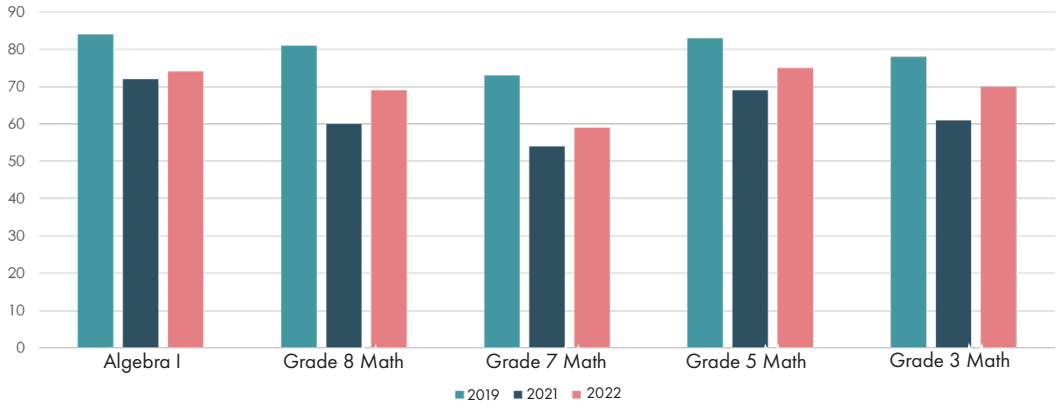


Figure 10. Statewide STAAR Math Scores 2019-2022[x]



Student test scores, while a strong indicator of a student's ability to meet grade level academic standards, are only a single facet of student success. Students require holistic support, inside and outside of the classroom, to ensure a successful transition into adulthood.

Mental Health

Many students continue to struggle with mental health. In 2022, 73.1% of Texas youth with Major Depression remained untreated, up from 65.4% in 2020, with Texas ranking 51st for mental health work force availability.[45] Outside of the home, schools are the most likely place where mental health concerns will be detected and addressed.[46] For approximately 1 in 6 school-aged youth, mental illness impacts their academic achievement.[47] Students' mental health reached crisis levels during the pandemic due to social isolation, rises in domestic violence, increased familial financial stressors, family death and illness, and more, leading to an increased need for supplemental in-school supports. According to TEA data, school districts in Harris County have 919 students per counselor, exceeding the recommended state ratio by 669 students, which is 1:250.[48]

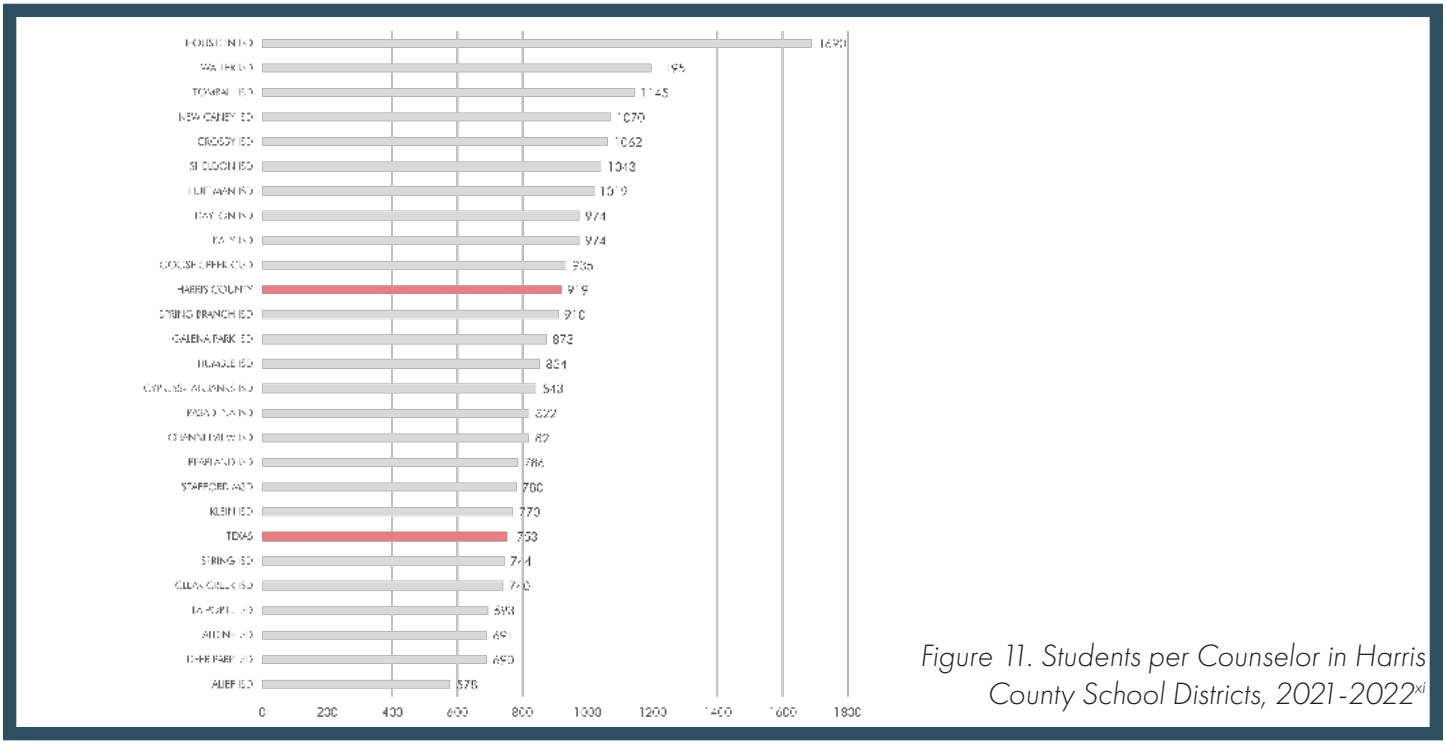


Figure 11. Students per Counselor in Harris County School Districts, 2021-2022[xi]

Strong mental health supports help students stay in school. An example of a local organization addressing this issue is the nonprofit organization Communities in Schools (CIS). In 2012, they launched a mental health initiative to serve students in need of counseling services through school referrals. In CIS's first year, they served 300 students across 5 schools. In the 2020-2021 schools year, CIS was able to reach 5,163 students across 82 schools.[49] Currently, CIS is working across 32 school campuses in 5 major Houston area school districts (Aldine ISD, Alief ISD, Houston ISD, Spring ISD, Spring Branch ISD). 99% of CIS students stayed in school, while 98% of CIS eligible seniors graduated.[50] Though resources such as CIS and MHA provide school-linked behavioral health initiatives, the programs cannot meet current demand.

CHILDREN AT RISK analyzed the budgets of 267 school districts across Texas and 4,652 districts across the nation. We found that 78% of Texas school districts have planned spending in Mental and Physical Health. Table 1 shows planned commitment of ESSER dollars for mental health

resources (within districts that reported their spending). Through this analysis of planned spending budgets, we can see school district spending priorities and advocate for sustainable mental health funding for when these grant dollars run out, as well as evaluate the impact of mental health investments on future academic outcomes.

Table 1. Houston School District Intended ESSER Spending on Mental Health[xii]

District Name	Mental or Physical Health Specialist Staffing	Behavioral or Mental Health	Social Emotional Learning Program
Clear Creek ISD	✓	✓	
Aldine ISD	✓	✓	✓
Goose Creek CISD			
Houston ISD	✓	✓	
Galena Park	✓	✓	
New Caney ISD			✓
Spring ISD			
Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District		✓	✓
Pearland ISD	✓	✓	
Humble ISD		✓	✓
Katy ISD	✓	✓	✓
Klein ISD	✓	✓	
La Porte ISD			
Spring Branch	✓	✓	✓
Waller ISD			
Alief ISD		✓	✓
Channelview ISD			
Pasadena		✓	
Sheldon ISD	✓	✓	✓
Tomball ISD			

Chronic Absenteeism

Mental health is unfortunately only one of many barriers to student success. For a number of social, financial, and circumstantial factors, many students in Harris County are chronically absent from school.

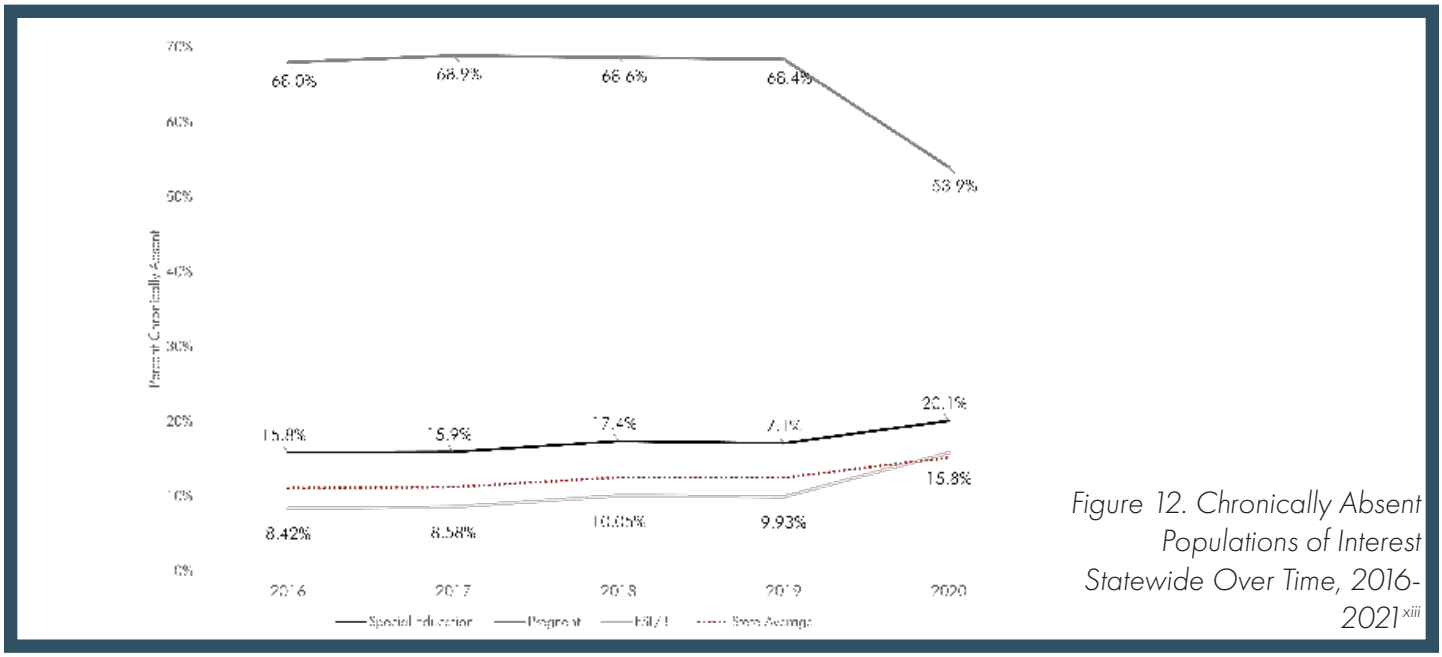


Figure 12. Chronically Absent Populations of Interest Statewide Over Time, 2016-2021[xiii]

As defined by Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), a student is considered chronically absent when they miss 10% or more of school days within an academic year for any reason. When a student is chronically absent, they miss enough school to inhibit their learning and are less likely to graduate on time or, if they do graduate, enroll in and complete college. Chronic absenteeism differs from truancy in that it includes excused and unexcused absences.[51]

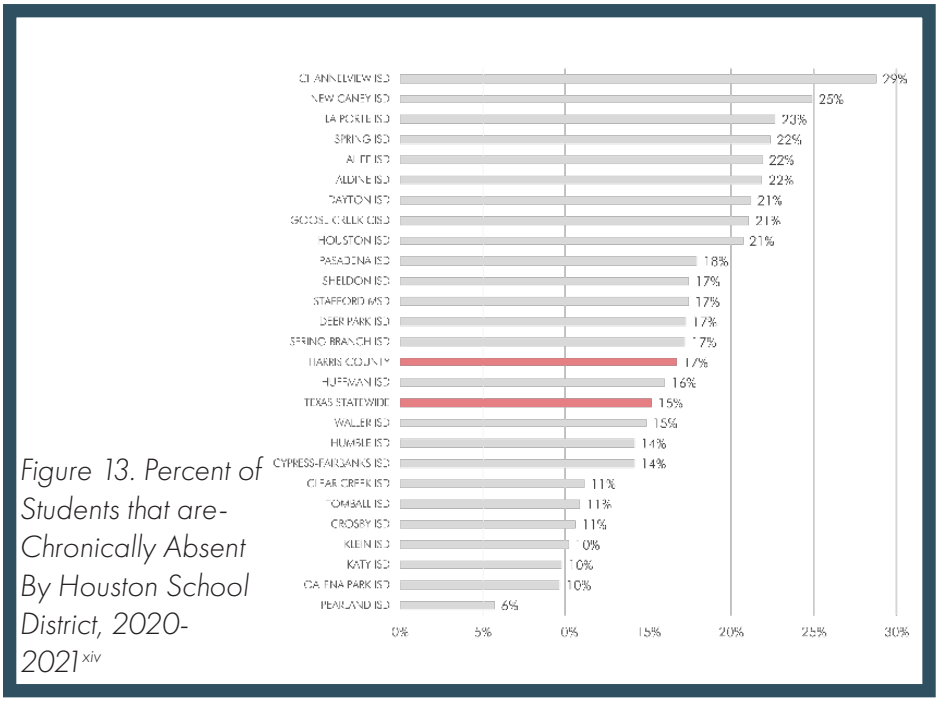


Figure 13. Percent of Students that are-Chronically Absent By Houston School District, 2020-2021[xiv]

Many student populations are at higher risk to be chronically absent. Economically disadvantaged students, ESL/IBL, Special Education, and pregnant students experience higher rates of chronic absenteeism than their peers. In fact, over 50% of pregnant students were chronically absent in the 2020-2021 school year, a decrease from previous years likely due to virtual schooling.[52] Around 70% of Harris County students were economically disadvantaged in 2021-2022 school

year.[53] In other words, the majority of Harris County students are at an elevated risk of missing over 10% or more of school days. In the 2020-2021 school year, 17% of Harris County students were chronically absent, surpassing the state average of 15%. Students in grades 9-12 had the highest levels of chronic absenteeism.[54]

School Discipline and The School-to-Prison Pipeline

Students are unlikely to meet grade level standards if they aren't in school. Chronic absenteeism is also associated with an increased risk of juvenile justice system contact.[55] According to a study conducted by Rice University examining school discipline's correlation with justice system involvement in HISD, the odds of juvenile justice system contact also increase with every out-of-school suspension (OSS) that a student may receive.[56] HISD students who have had at least one OSS are roughly 6x as likely to have justice system contact as their peers with no out-of-school suspensions, and students with at least one in-school suspension are twice as likely to have justice system involvement.[57]

Figure 14. School Suspensions in Harris County by Race/Ethnicity, 2021-2022[xv]

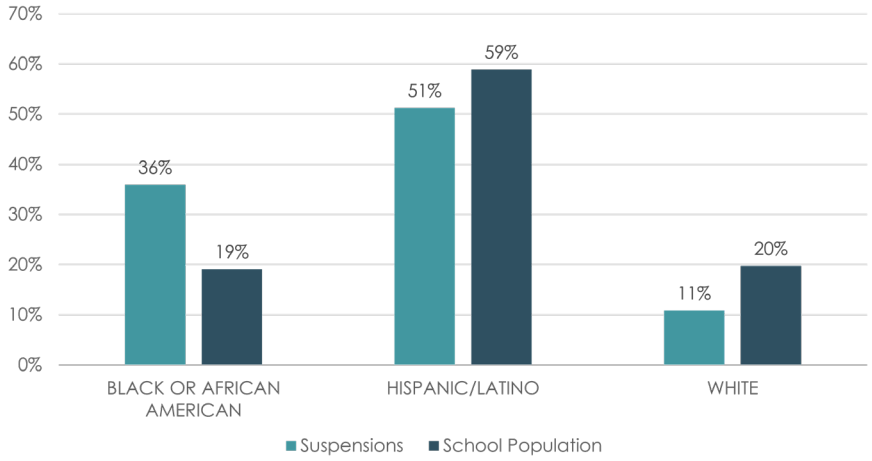
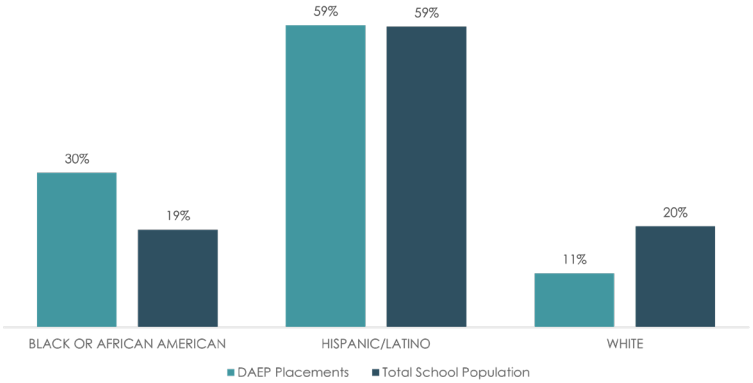


Figure 15. DAEP Placements by Race/Ethnicity Harris County 2021-2022[xvi]



These statistics are particularly alarming when accounting for racial disparities in students most likely to receive out of school suspensions. Black students in Harris County account for only 19% of the student population, but 36% of all suspended students.[58]

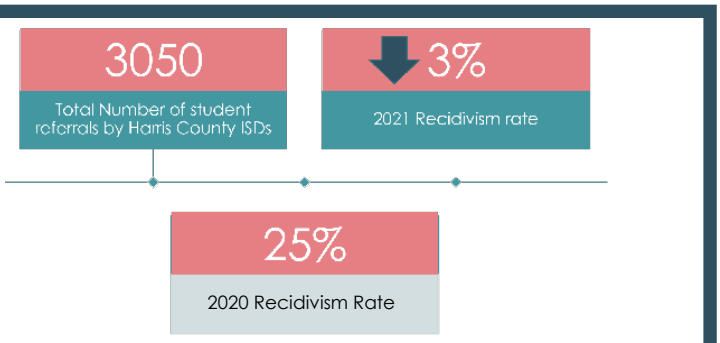


Figure 16. Changes in Referral and Recidivism Rates in Harris County, 2021[vii]

Black students are not only the most likely to be suspended, but also to get referred and receive charges. Overall, Black youth were 4x more likely to be referred to the Harris County Juvenile Probation Department (HCJPD) than their white peers.[59]

While overall, HISD students who were suspended were most likely to receive that suspension and have first contact with the juvenile justice system in the 9th grade, Black and Latino students are suspended and have their first justice system contact at earlier ages on average than their white peers.[60]

These disparities have significant implications for the futures of Harris County's historically marginalized students. Harris County schools need additional resources in order to offer supplemental support to our most marginalized children. Research has shown that restorative justice programs in schools present a viable alternative to exclusionary discipline and reduce stark racial disparities in school punishments.[61] While these innovative interventions are promising alternatives to disciplinary practices that inhibit student learning by removing them from school, they must be holistically integrated into schools.

Examples of culturally responsive successful restorative practices include community circles, restorative conversations, restorative conference and calming/affirming therapeutic movement. Guided by teachers and school administrators, such programs can reduce conflict, decrease school absences, foster an equitable learning environment, and improve overall school safety.

Quality Bilingual Programs

In Houston ISD, the largest school district in Harris County, an estimated 100 different languages are spoken by students.[62] This highlights the necessity of increased support for English as a Second Language (ESL) students. From the 2017-2018 school year to the 2021-2022 school year, the number of emergent bilinguals/English learners in Harris County ISDs increased by 10%. The number of ESL students has risen 12%. These trends mirror the state data, as depicted in Figure 17, and emphasize the need for investment in

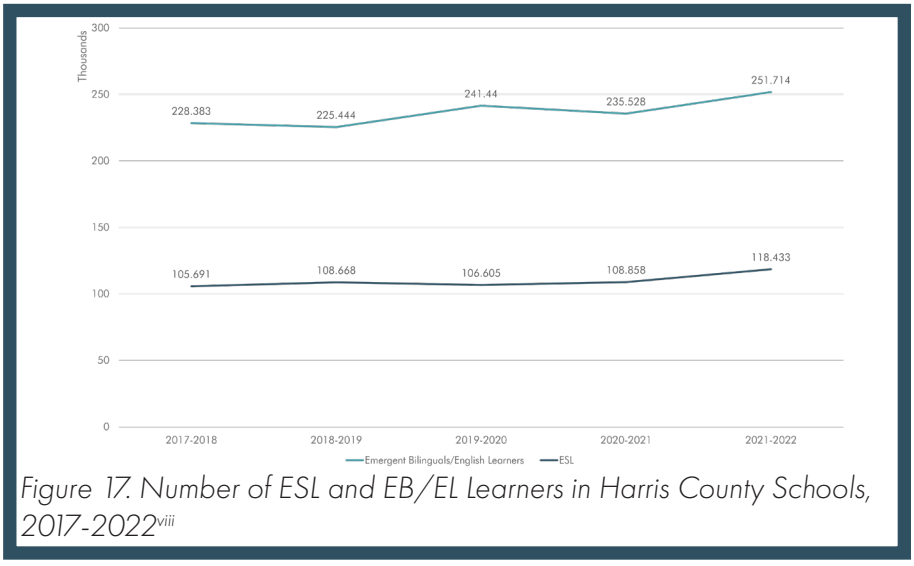


Figure 17. Number of ESL and EB/EL Learners in Harris County Schools, 2017-2022[viii]

programs and support for these students. As numbers of English Learners (EL) and ESL students rise, Houston must increase support of bi/multilingual instructional materials, increase program expenditures for bilingual education, and prioritize recruitment of bilingual/ESL teachers when addressing widespread teacher shortage.

While most immigrant students are proficient in English, many newer students may struggle, especially if their family members are not native English speakers. These supports for English learner programs are essential to the overall educational success of immigrant children.

Immigrant children face several unique educational challenges, due in part to linguistic, cultural, and legal concerns. While these obstacles have the potential to impact all immigrant students, they are particularly compounded for undocumented students. There are an estimated 111,000 undocumented students in K-12 in Texas.[63] Less than 3% of current DACA recipients nationwide are between the ages of 16 and 20 years old.[64] Research has shown that DACA recipients have lower chronic absenteeism rates and higher graduation rates compared to their ineligible peers.[65] Due to DACA program requirements that applicants must possess and prove 15 years of continuous presence in the US, 88% of Texas' K-12 immigrant students are ineligible for DACA, including 75% of the state's undocumented high school graduates.[66] This may affect qualification for jobs, in-state tuition, students' mental health, and their overall educational attainment. Texas needs a growing number of college and career ready graduates to maintain its workforce and ever-growing economy.

Teacher Workforce

Schools are not sustainable without high-quality, high-performing teachers in the classroom. An investment in teachers is an investment in economic growth for Texas. This investment means diversifying the teacher workforce, ensuring adequate high-quality teacher preparation programs, and ensuring strong school and district leadership to promote sustainable, high-performing, and inclusive school climates.

According to a state-by-state review led by Education Trust, Texas is successful in providing funding and guidance for Grow Your Own programs that attract educators of color but falls behind in providing guidance on cultural competence and anti-bias trainings and resources for hiring managers.[67] Houston school districts must set clear, measurable goals to hire teachers and administrators that reflect the race and culture of its students.

Data shows that teachers of color positively impact students' success when students can identify with their teacher racially and culturally. A Johns Hopkins University study found that Black students who had at least one Black teacher by third grade were 13% more likely to enroll in college.[68] Research has shown that low diversity in teacher workforce can lead to a lack in fairness in disciplinary actions, expectations of students, academic achievement levels, and higher dropout rates.[69] Diversifying the teacher workforce is a critical piece in closing the achievement gap and creating equi-

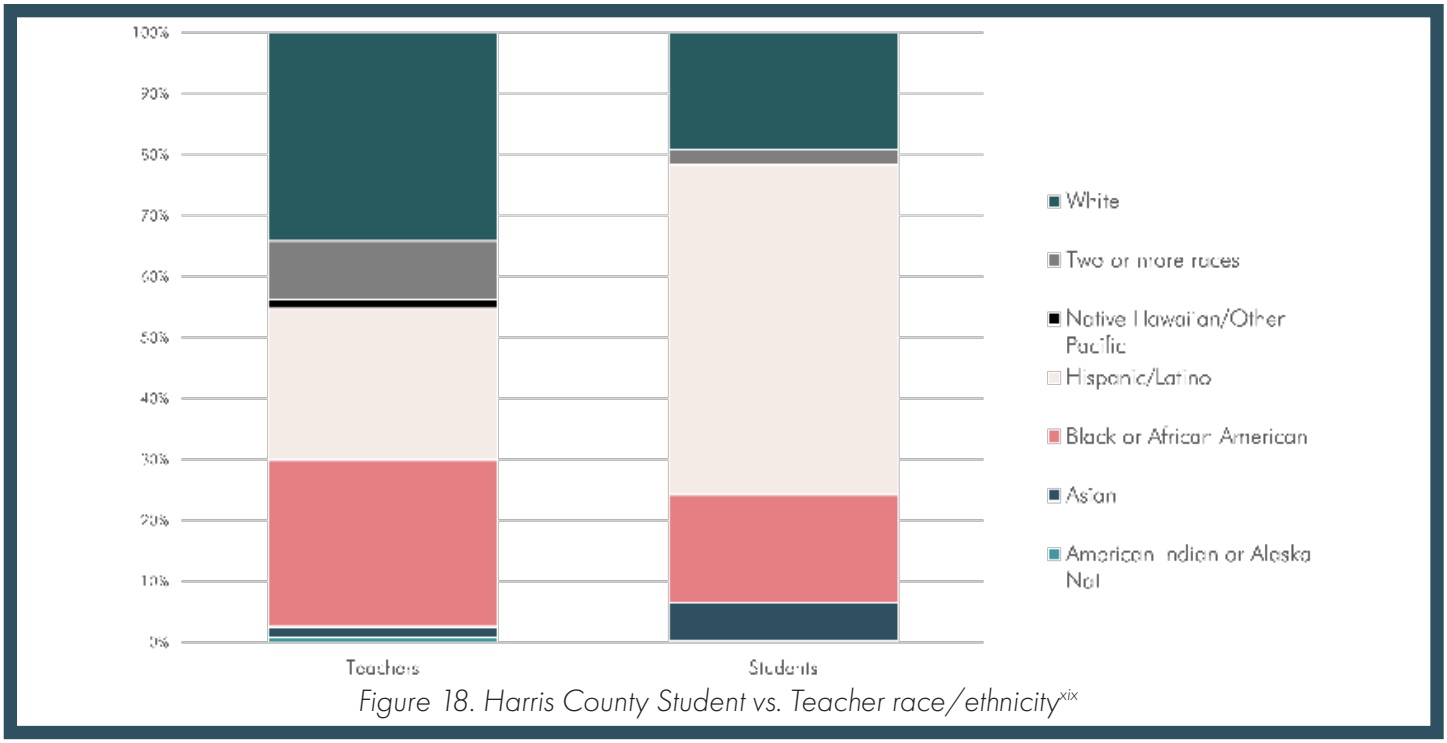


Figure 18. Harris County Student vs. Teacher race/ethnicity[xix]

table schools. As shown in Figure 18, Harris County teachers are somewhat representative of their students, by demographic. Though students of color make up over 80% of the Harris County public school population, only 66% of our current teacher workforce identify as people of color. Houston is not exempt from the national trend of teachers leaving the classroom. Growing external pressures to produce high- performing learning outcomes in an engaging yet politically constrained learning environment led to high teacher turnover rates. A survey by the Texas State Teachers Association found that 70% of teachers surveyed expressed serious consideration of leaving the profession, a jump from 53% in 2018. In this same 2022 survey, almost 94% expressed an increase in stress in their professional lives post -pandemic. The challenges brought into classrooms in the past two years – distance learning, learning loss, and political debates – are creating crises in the number of teachers. The statewide employed teacher attrition rate rose to 11.57% in the 2021-2022 school year from 9.34% in 2020-2021. Though this 2.23% gap includes 9,000 teachers, the percentage of new hires only rose 0.6% (2,253) from the previous school year.[70] When the 2022 school year started in August, there were 2,236 vacancies across five of the area's largest districts (HISD, CFISD, Fort Bend ISD, Aldine ISD, and Katy ISD).[71]

Research over the past decades has identified teacher attrition as the primary cause of the shortage of teachers. This is particularly true in high-poverty schools where attrition can be extraordinarily high. School leadership is another key driver of teacher turnover. Principals and adjacent school leadership play a vital role in creating professional environments that lead to teacher retention. Several studies highlight a significant relationship between principal turnover and teacher turnover, with teacher turnover spiking in schools that experience leadership turnover.[72]

School Rankings

For the past 18 years, CHILDREN AT RISK has ranked nearly 8,000 public schools in Texas to help parents, educators, and community members understand how their schools are performing and spark dialogue on the quality of public education in our state. The rankings consist of four domains: (1) Student Achievement, (2) Campus Performance, (3) Student Growth, and (4) College Readiness. The last domain, College Readiness, only applies to high schools. Many schools across the Houston region receive "A" or "B" grades in CHILDREN AT RISK's annual School Rankings. Here are examples of area schools which have scored well in the various domains:[73]

Student Achievement	A	**Spring Branch Academic Institute** in Spring Branch ISD has an "A" in Student Achievement – within the Greater Houston area, this school has the highest percentage of its students of which meet or exceeds the STAAR Reading and Math exams.
Campus Performance	A	**Project Chrysalis Middle School** in Houston ISD has an "A" in Campus Performance – 76.4% of its students are economically disadvantaged and 72.7% of its students are at the Meets Grade Level and above on the STAAR Reading and Math exams. This is significantly higher than socioeconomically similar schools across Texas.
Student Growth	A	**Commonwealth Elementary** in Fort Bend ISD has an "A" in Student Growth – Of all elementary schools in the Greater Houston Area, the students at this school exhibit superior growth year-to-year on their STAAR Reading and Math exams.
College Readiness	A	**Clear Horizons Early College High School** in Clear Creek ISD has an "A" in College Readiness – Clear Horizons ECHS has a 100% participation rate in either the ACT or SAT. The school's average SAT score was 11% higher than the national average and 17% higher than the state average.

Table 2. C@R School Ranking Categories and Examples

In the 2022 School Rankings, CHILDREN AT RISK, ranked over 1,300 elementary, middle, and high schools in the Greater Houston area. Of these 1,336 schools, 29% earned an "A" or "B" grade, down from 42% of schools in 2019.

66% of the students attending public schools in the Houston Region live in economically disadvantaged circumstances. For all campuses, Houston has seen a slight increase of overall scores since pre-pandemic years. While schools demonstrated a decrease in student achievement, and high schools in the Houston area have seen a dramatic decline in college readiness scores, Houston area schools show strong improvement since previous years with growth scores increasing since 2019.

Schools with a high share of economically disadvantaged students are underperforming compared to their more affluent counterparts. However, there are many schools excelling despite these challenges. Each year, CHILDREN AT RISK recognizes schools that are high-performing ("A" or "B" schools) and have a high concentration of students who are low income or in poverty. To qualify, at

least 75% of a schools' students must be living in such economically disadvantaged circumstances. These schools are known as Gold Ribbon Schools. 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 equitable, holistic, and successful support for their students. The Houston region has seen a decrease in Gold Ribbon Schools, particularly amongst middle school campuses. In 2022, there were 72 Gold Ribbon Schools in the Houston Region (59 elementary, 8 middle, and 5 high), down from 82 in 2019 (56 elementary, 23 middle, and 3 high).[74]

As shown in Table 3, Harris County's top districts have seen a decline in the number of Gold Ribbon schools, with the exception of Houston ISD, which continues to perform exceptionally well in this category.

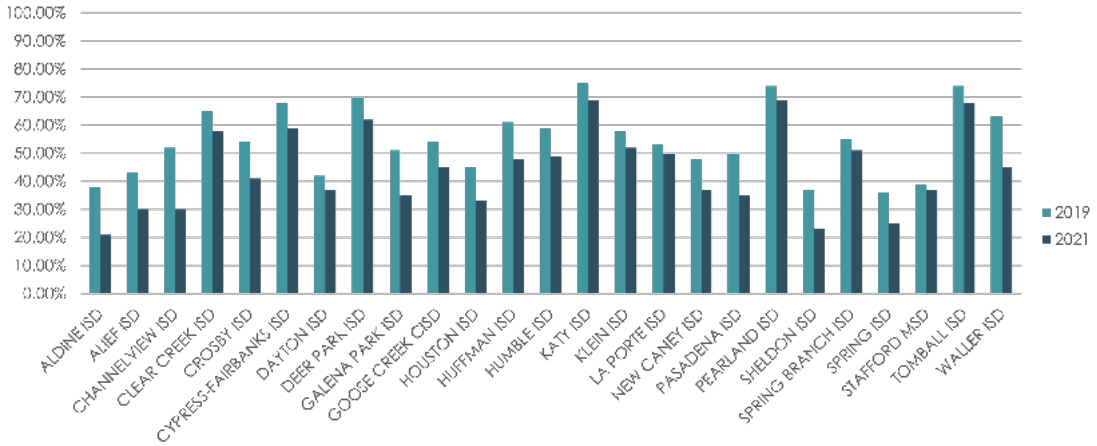
	Total Campuses	Total No. A or B Schools	No. Gold Ribbon Eligible Schools	No. 2022 Gold Ribbon Schools	No. 2019 Gold Ribbon Schools
Houston ISD	265	101	124	24	17
Galena Park ISD	21	10	21	10	13
Pasadena ISD	48	8	42	6	13
Aldine ISD	58	4	47	4	5
Alief ISD	19	5	18	4	6
Cypress-Fairbanks ISD	84	38	30	3	5

Table 3. Changes in Number of Gold Ribbon Schools in Houston's 6 Largest Shool Districts[xx]

STEM

A Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) curriculum is imperative in developing critical thinking skills from an early age to post-secondary success and onward. Texas is expected to have a 20% growth in STEM jobs from 2017 to 2027, standing as the state with the second-highest percentage of the nation's future STEM job opportunities.[75] While the Texas Education Agency (TEA)

Figure 19. Percentage of Students in All Grades Meeting Grade Level and Above for Science STAAR Performance by School District[xxi]



continues to find innovative ways to provide educational opportunities for students, they acknowledge this reality and have expanded on goals for strong STEM education in Texas: to build strong foundations in STEM literacy, to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion in STEM, and to prepare the STEM Workforce for the future.[76] Standing TEA initiatives include:

- Texas EcosySTEMs
- A STEM Framework that schools can seek out as a guide for STEM programming.
- Texas Mobile STEM Labs are custom STEM learning spaces to provide hands-on educational experiences for teachers and students.
- P-Tech CCRSM (College and Career Readiness School Models)
- T-STEM Academies

T-STEM academies are "open-enrollment secondary schools focusing on improving instruction and academic performance in science and mathematics-related subjects and increasing the number of students who study and enter STEM careers."[77] Over the period of 3 years, 609,705 Texas students enrolled in 8th grade to earn a STEM Endorsement, but only 9,161 students completed a STEM Endorsement in 12th grade.[78] Access and enrollment to STEM courses like Computer Science continue being disproportionate by gender and race/ethnicity. Table 4 lists the current standing CCRSM STEM schools offered specifically across the 25 Harris County Public Schools.

While these steps towards integrating STEM as a core focus in student learning are progress, there is more work to be done. Though STEM Academies and CCRSMs implement strong academic strategies for students, they are limited to the number of seats available and often serve exclusively high school students.

Preparing a strong and diverse STEM-educated workforce must begin in early grades. In the 2022 "Nation's Report Card" the average score of mathematics for fourth-grade students in Texas was 239, decreasing 5 points from the previous testing year (2019).[79] Houston fell below average both years, with an average score of 226 in 2022, dropping from 235 in 2019.[80] We see similar trends in eighth-grade data with the Houston average dropping from 274 in 2019 to a score of 265 in 2022.[81]

Racial inequities persist as we breakdown performance by demographic. A survey from UScellular found that 40% of students feel STEM careers aren't welcoming to women, and almost half think there isn't enough racial diversity in the STEM workforce.[82] Parents and students agreed that STEM is important in education pathways but lack access to engagement with STEM. Along with ensuring diversity in the STEM workforce and increasing access to STEM curriculum for students, there must be focus on maintaining high quality STEM teachers. In the 2021-22 school year, 30.93% of mathematics teachers and 31.64% of science teachers in the state have fewer than 5 years of experience.[83]

Table 4. CCRSMs in Harris County[xxii]

CCRSM Model	District	School	CCRSM Designation Status
ECHS	Aldine ISD	Victory Early College High School	Designated
P-TECH	Aldine ISD	Carver High School for Applied Technology/Engineering/ Arts	Provisional
P-TECH	Aldine ISD	Avalos P-TECH High School	Provisional
ECHS	Alief ISD	Alief Early College High School	Designated
P-TECH	Alief ISD	Hastings High School	Provisional
P-TECH	Goose Creek ISD	Stuart Career Tech High School	Provisional
ECHS	Clear Creek ISD	Clear Horizons Early College High School	Designated
ECHS	Galena Park ISD	Galena Park ISD Career & Technical ECHS	Designated
ECHS	Goose Creek CISD	IMPACT Early College High School	Designated
P-TECH	Goose Creek CISD	Sterling High School	Provisional
P-TECH	Goose Creek CISD	Stuart Career Tech High School	Provisional
T-STEM	Goose Creek CISD	Lee High School	Designated
ECHS	Houston ISD	Challenge Early College High School	Designated
ECHS	Houston ISD	East Early College High School	Designated
ECHS	Houston ISD	Houston Academy For International Studies	Designated
ECHS	Houston ISD	North Houston Early College High School	Designated
ECHS	Houston ISD	South Early College High School	Designated
ECHS	Houston ISD	Sterling High School	Provisional
ECHS	Houston ISD	Worthing High School	Provisional
P-TECH	Houston ISD	Jones Future Academy	Provisional
P-TECH	Houston ISD	Wheatley High School	Provisional

Table 3 Continued. CCRSMs in Harris County

CCRSM Model	District	School	CCRSM Designation Status
ECHS	Humble ISD	Quest Early College High School	Designated
T-STEM	Humble ISD	Humble High School	Designated
ECHS	Klein ISD	Vistas Early College High School	Provisional
ECHS	New Caney ISD	Infinity Early College High School	Designated
ECHS	Pasadena ISD	Dobie High School	Designated
ECHS	Pasadena ISD	Pasadena High School	Designated
ECHS	Pasadena ISD	Pasadena Memorial High School	Designated
ECHS	Pasadena ISD	Sam Rayburn High School	Designated
ECHS	Pasadena ISD	South Houston High School	Designated
ECHS	Spring ISD	Spring Early College Academy	Designated
P-TECH	Spring ISD	Andy Dekaney High School	Provisional
ECHS	Stafford MSD	Stafford High School	Provisional
ECHS	Tomball ISD	Tomball Star Academy	Designated

A Path Forward - K-12 Education

- All children need access to high-quality, equitable education from birth through 12th grade.
- Schools must be equipped to quickly identify students' academic and social-emotional struggles and intervene effectively and compassionately using thoughtfully collected data.
- Schools should 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.
- Texas should appropriately allocate funding that supports all public-school students including but not limited to early education, economically disadvantaged students, and dual-language learners.

Quality Bilingual Ed Programs:

As numbers of EL and ESL students rise, Houston must increase support of bi/multilingual instructional materials, increase program expenditures for bilingual education, and prioritize recruitment of bilingual/ESL teachers when addressing widespread teacher shortage.

Mental Health:

There is no ignoring the urgent need to ensure our students' mental health needs are met. For schools to successfully reach all students, the state must:

- Set required ratios for counselors and mental health professionals per student in public schools.
- Provide long-term funding for schools to establish school-based health centers that include sustainable mental health services when ESSER funds run out.

Chronic Absenteeism:

Currently, chronic absenteeism is not codified or reported under the Texas Education Code. To improve service delivery and outcomes for these students, legislators should:

- Establish an official definition of chronic absenteeism in the Texas Education Code (missing 10% of school days) so that precise datasets can be collected and used to focus on areas with particularly high absence rates.
- Add chronic absenteeism to the "at risk" category to better support students who are chronically absent and therefore at risk of dropping out.
- Require the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to report chronic absenteeism to increase transparency and facilitate targeted improvement of student supports.

Teacher Workforce:

The legislature must take steps to address the teacher shortage while prioritizing a high quality, diverse workforce and promoting inclusive school climates and curriculum.

- Support adoption and implementation of strategic investments passed in House Bill 3 (2019), including the Teacher Incentive Allotment and Additional Days School Year funding.

STEM:

Texas needs to invest in STEM integration into curriculum from early education through college. While building STEM programmatic work throughout academia, we must:

- Prioritize a diverse STEM workforce by ensuring there are high quality STEM opportunities for schools serving a high population of economically disadvantaged students.
- Increase access to quality STEM programs.

OPPORTUNITY & RESILIENCE

Opportunity Youth

The term opportunity youth and young adults (OYYA) refers to youth between the ages of 16-24 who are disconnected from the conventional paths of adulthood (e.g. neither in school, nor training, nor in the workforce). This disconnection may stem from various factors – including but not limited to not finishing school, involvement in foster care or the juvenile justice system, being a teen parent, drug addiction, or housing insecurity.

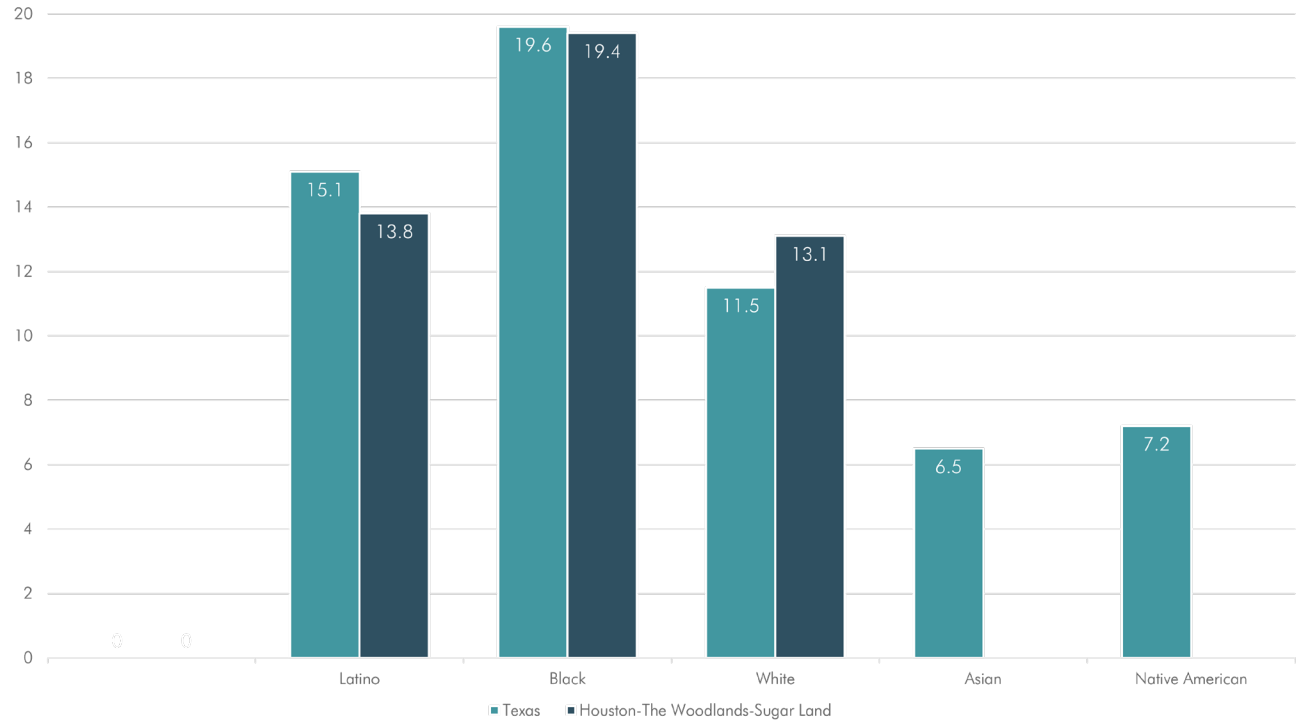


Figure 20. Percent of Population that are Opportunity Youth by Race/Ethnicity, 2020 [xxiii]

It is estimated that in 2020 14.3% of 16–24-year-olds in the Houston area qualified as opportunity youth and young adults.[84] When broken down by race/ethnicity, rates of disconnection are disproportionate. Black youth are more likely to be opportunity youth and young adults, with 19.4% of Black youth ages 16-24 in the Houston area falling into this category.[85]

Opportunity youth and young adults face many barriers when it comes to re-connecting and participating in the economy and society. Many OYYA, like those aging out of foster care or experiencing housing insecurity, often lack the connections and resources necessary to navigate adulthood and seek employment. Due to their age, they are unaware of how or where to access services. For example, OYYA may struggle with programs that require certain technology (laptop or printer) or transportation needs. For some OYYA, their age creates a challenge to accessing services. For those who are under 18, they might avoid resources because providers are required to report them to Child Protective Services (CPS). Even for those above 18, services, like a homeless shelter that caters to adults of all ages, can feel unsafe for a young person.[86]

Foster Care

Youth involved in the foster care system are extremely vulnerable to disconnection. High school dropout rates are 3x higher for foster youth than other low-income children.[87] Nationally, less than 5% of former foster youth receive a bachelor's degree and less than 10% receive a 2-year degree.[88] This makes foster youth much more likely to qualify as opportunity youth and young adults, especially as a college degree becomes increasingly important to get a job.[89]

Youth in the foster care system age out of the system when they turn 18. While there are short-term options for some of these youth (specifically those who are in school or employed), youth who age out often fall through the cracks. Unaccompanied minors who arrive in the U.S. without a sponsor and cannot find one end up in long-term foster care while in the Office of Refugee Resettlement custody. When they age out of the system at 18, which for many could be just a few years after their arrival, they are left with little to no support. They have increased vulnerability due to cultural and language barriers, and legal status.[90] In fact, studies from across the country have found that between a fourth and a third of all youth aging out of foster care experience homelessness within their first few years of adulthood.[91,92]

Pregnant Youth

Youth and young adults who get pregnant are also particularly vulnerable to disconnection. In 2020, Texas had the 9th highest teen birth rate in the country at 22.4% and the first highest rate of repeat teen birth.[93] In Texas, 1-in-6 teens who gave birth had other children.[94] The demands of having a child create additional barriers for young people to continue their education or career path. For example, over 50% of pregnant youth in Texas public schools were chronically absent (missed 10% or more of school days) in the 2020-2021 school year. This is a welcomed decline from over 68% in 2019-2020, likely due to the availability of online class.[95]

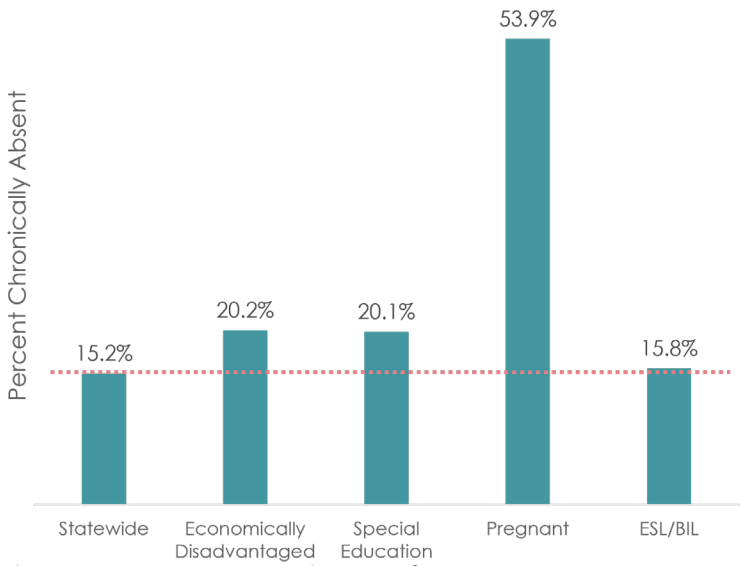


Figure 21. Rates of Chronic Absenteeism Among Populations of Interest, 2021[xxiv]

Nationally, 22% of undergraduate students are parents themselves, yet there is no state in which a parent can work 10 hours a week at minimum wage and afford both public tuition and child care.[96,97] In Texas, less than 40% of public higher education institutions have campus child care.[98]

The Path Forward - Opportunity Youth

Per Measure of America, the COVID-19 pandemic undid a decade of progress in reconnecting young adults in America.[99] As Houston recovers, these young people need and deserve additional supports as they navigate the beginning of their adult lives. However, Texas currently does have a plan for these young adults: providing dollars to local workforce boards (LWBs). LWBs are groups of community leaders, positioned to oversee workforce programs and other services in their area. To reconnect opportunity youth and young adults in Houston and statewide, Texas needs to require local workforce boards (LWBs) to include an opportunity youth section in their strategic plans with specific goals, metrics, and transparent reporting requirements. By creating an explicit metric, the state can incentivize LWBs to be intentional and creative in how they can improve outcomes for opportunity youth and young adults.

Human Trafficking

Trafficking is intentionally benefiting from or causing someone to participate in exploitative labor or commercial sex using force, fraud, or coercion.[100] For child sex trafficking victims, a prosecutor need not prove force, fraud, or coercion; it is enough that a trafficker benefitted from or caused the child to participate in commercial sexual exploitation.[101] Furthermore, commercial sexual exploitation can take many forms, such as the creation and distribution of child sexual abuse materials.[102]

Scope of the Problem

The most recent population estimate comes from a 2016 University of Texas study. Researchers estimated that there were approximately 79,000 minor and youth victims of sex trafficking, and approximately 234,000 labor trafficking victims in Texas at the time of the study.[103] Given what we know about the effects of the pandemic, we would expect that those numbers have only increased.

In Houston, illicit massage businesses and illicit cantinas commonly serve as fronts for prostitution and human trafficking. The Polaris Project labeled the illicit cantina model the "Houston model" due to their prevalence in Houston. Illicit cantinas may appear from the outside like a regular bar. They rely on word of mouth and introductions, and therefore data and location information is largely unknown to researchers. Nevertheless, they have been the site of unspeakable human cruelty.[104]

Illicit massage businesses pose as legitimate businesses offering massage services, when in fact they rely on exploiting the women who work there for sexual services. In spring of 2018, CHILDREN AT RISK mapped the location of suspected illicit massage businesses and schools both in Houston, and throughout the state. CHILDREN AT RISK found 259 suspected illicit massage businesses that were open and operating in Harris County, many of which were close to schools.[105] In fact, C@R estimated that over 16,000 Harris County children attended a school within 1,000 feet of a suspected illicit massage business.[106]

CHILDREN AT RISK found a total number of 689 suspected illicit massage businesses in the state of Texas. Only four years later, in May of 2022, Demand Disruption found that the number of suspected illicit massage businesses across the state had nearly doubled to 1,325 and that the number of suspected illicit massage businesses in Harris County had risen to 328.

Over 16,000 Harris County children attended school within 1,000 feet of a suspected illicit massage business.

Debunking Common Myths

Most depictions of trafficking in the media involve a dangerous, frightening looking trafficker who is unknown to their victim, that use force to imprison and exploit their victims. These depictions, along with conspiracy theories and urban legends, encourage parents to focus on "stranger danger," focusing on the perception that strangers pose the greatest threat to their children. However, only

8.5% of sex trafficking victims are abducted by their traffickers, and traffickers and predators are often well-known to both children and parents.[107] These victimizers groom not only the children they seek to exploit, but also the parents in a bid to gain their trust.

Human trafficking and human smuggling are often used interchangeably in media reports, but they are very different crimes. Human trafficking does not have to involve transportation at all, and in fact some victims are trafficked while never leaving their home. Additionally, trafficking is perpetuated, both domestically and abroad, by American buyers who have the funds to purchase sex.[108]

Familial trafficking, or the trafficking of a victim by a family member, is a particularly heartbreaking example. In 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic minimized contact with strangers and friends alike, it was estimated between 31 – 41% of all child sex trafficking began in a family unit.[109] Another estimated 37% of sex trafficking victims were victimized by a spouse or intimate partner.[110]

Finally, men and boys are trafficked for both sex and labor, yet few resources exist for male victims. Outreach and resources are often targeted at women and girls. Men, boys, and those along the gender and sexuality spectrum are an often invisible or under-supported population of victims. Men, boys, and those who identify as LGBTQIA+ are much less likely to make an outcry or seek help, and often they suffer in silence. In Harris County, 75% of the homeless population are minority youth, and 25% identify as LGBTQ+. LGBTQ+ youth are overrepresented among the population of homeless youth, but underrepresented in anti-trafficking policies and social programs, despite their need for such advocacy.[111]

Risk Factors/Vulnerabilities

Risk Factor	% of Situations Reported, 2020
Recent Migration/Relocation	52.4%
Sustance Use Concern	9.5%
Unstable Housing	8.9%
Runaway/Homeless Youth	8.4%

Table 4. Top 5 Human Trafficking Risk Factors [xxv]

Children in foster care, children and adults with a history of abuse, those facing homelessness or housing insecurity, and those struggling to meet basic needs are more likely to be trafficked, in comparison to the general population.[112] Homelessness, substance abuse, and housing insecurity are the three most reported risk factors.[113]

Immigration status may also be a factor in unaccompanied children and those seeking asylum being more vulnerable to human trafficking. Without legal status and the threat of deportation, many will live in the shadows, further isolating them and undermining the ability to meet their basic needs. In many cases, these children have also experienced trauma in their country of origin, or along their journey, which is further compounded by being separated from their families.

A Path Forward - Human Trafficking

Moving forward, human trafficking advocates must work across sectors with housing, anti-poverty, and foster care advocates to ensure that vulnerable adults and children have the resources and support they need to avoid falling victim to traffickers. Improving existing government agencies to provide greater access to social benefits and more safe, affordable housing, in addition to a well-resourced child welfare system, would do more to decrease and prevent the number of human trafficking victims than anti- trafficking advocates could ever accomplish alone.

Harris County has taken steps to provide affordable housing and shelter for the unhoused, moving 25,000 unhoused people into homes in the past ten years and cutting homelessness by 60%.[114] These kinds of supports are essential in keeping people from becoming vulnerable to trafficking. Furthermore, housing opportunities should be gender and sexuality inclusive. Agencies like the Montrose Center offer housing assistance to LGBTQ+ youth who are vulnerable on multiple fronts and often disconnected from unaccepting families. Programs like these should be expanded to serve more Houstonians in need, preventing them from ever becoming vulnerable to trafficking.

Additionally, those who profit from and victimize our most vulnerable must be held accountable. The Texas Legislature can better hold traffickers accountable by passing legislation requiring the registration of certain ATMs, allowing local government attorneys to collect penalty fees in civil suits against illicit massage businesses, increasing penalties for human traffickers who strangle their victims, and allowing prosecutors to try traffickers who have victimized disabled adults without requiring proof of force, fraud, or coercion.

Foster Care

Children in foster care are placed under the care of the state when they are found to be in an unsafe environment in their home.[115] This process usually begins with a report which, if substantiated, may result in an investigation. These investigations can reveal that children are victims of abuse, neglect, and trafficking, and the highest rates of recurrence are seen in cases with neglectful supervision and physical abuse.[116] Both neglect and abuse fall under the umbrella category of child maltreatment.

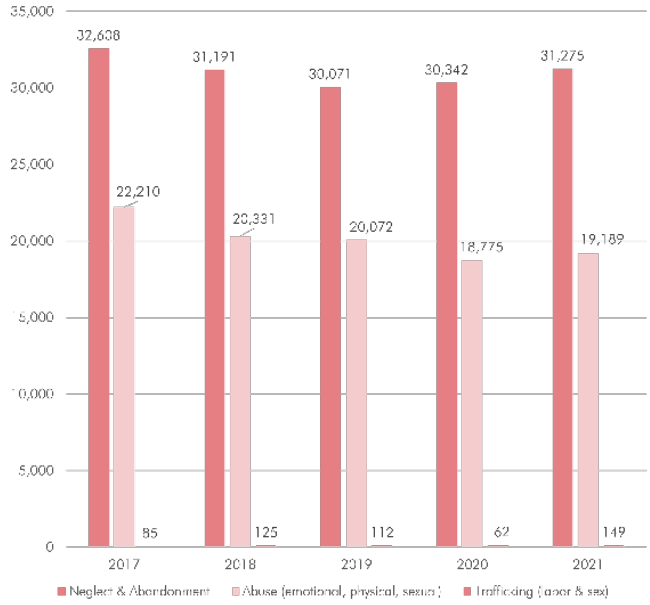


Figure 22. Maltreatment Allegations by Category, Harris County, 2017-2021[xxvi]

Historically, most children have been removed due to confirmed cases of neglect, while a smaller number of children are removed due to abuse. Aggressive removal for neglect poses a disproportionate risk of harm to low-income and struggling families who could benefit from prevention services and parenting supports.[117] In the 87th Legislative Session, House Bill 567 narrowed the definition of neglect to behavior that "creates an immediate danger to the child 's physical health or safety."[118] This policy change made it more difficult to remove children for neglect, potentially reducing harm to impoverished families, but also

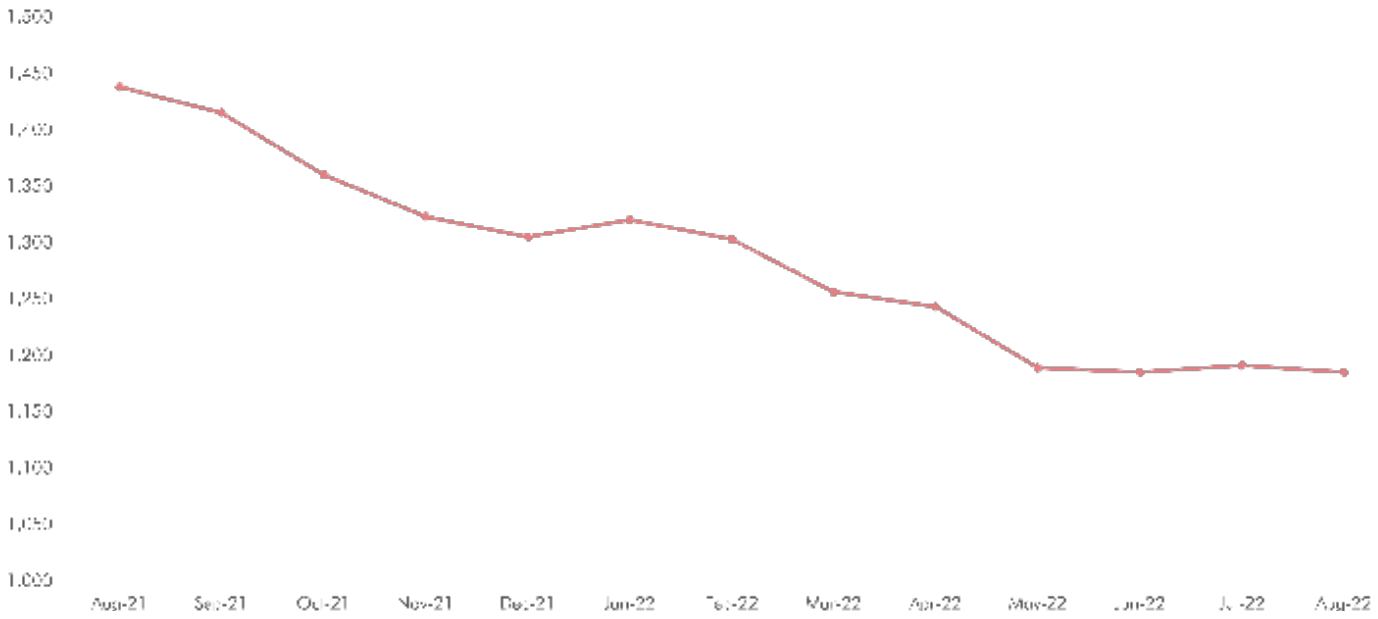


Figure 23. Total Children in Foster Care in Harris County, Aug. 2021-Aug. 2022[xxvii]

increasing the risk that some children who were experiencing severe maltreatment would not be removed. Legislators and caseworkers must balance these competing priorities as they continue to refine child welfare policy.

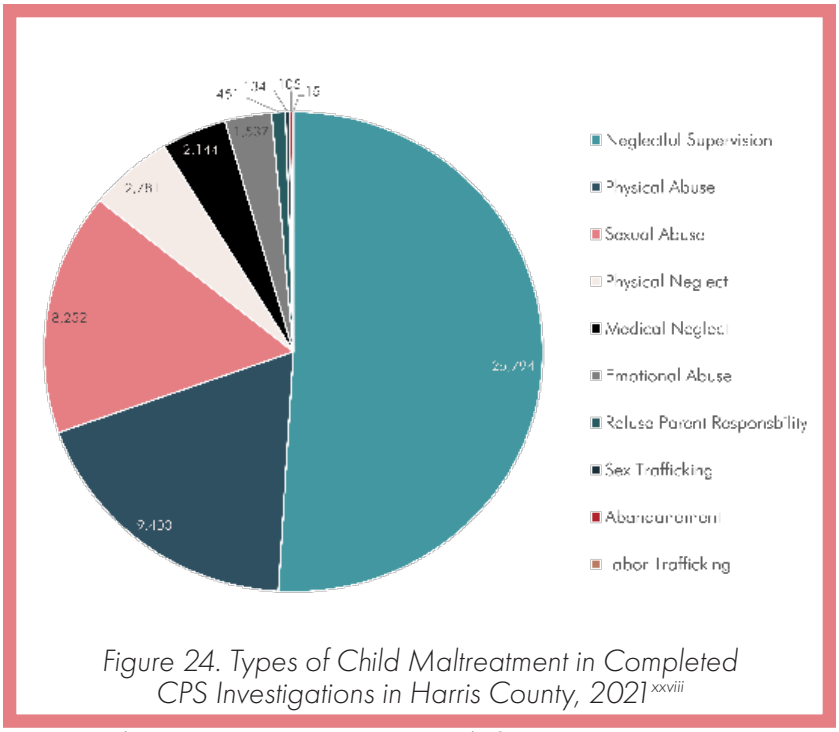


Figure 24. Types of Child Maltreatment in Completed CPS Investigations in Harris County, 2021 [xxviii]

Scope of the Problem

In 2021, the Texas Department of Family Protective Services (DFPS) completed 24,494 investigations into child maltreatment in Harris County with a total of 62,215 children.[119] Of the 24,494 completed investigations, investigators reached a finding of "reason to believe" in 4,975 cases.[120] The majority of these families are then referred to family-based services (or preventative services), but 829 Harris County children were removed from their family home due to these investigations. After a lengthy judicial proceeding of 12 months or more, some of these children will be removed permanently from their families and find themselves in foster care.[121] In 2021, Harris County had 1,436 children, ages 0-17, in foster care with 494 children that are waiting for adoption as a result of the court's termination of parental rights.[122]

Time in and Exiting from Foster Care

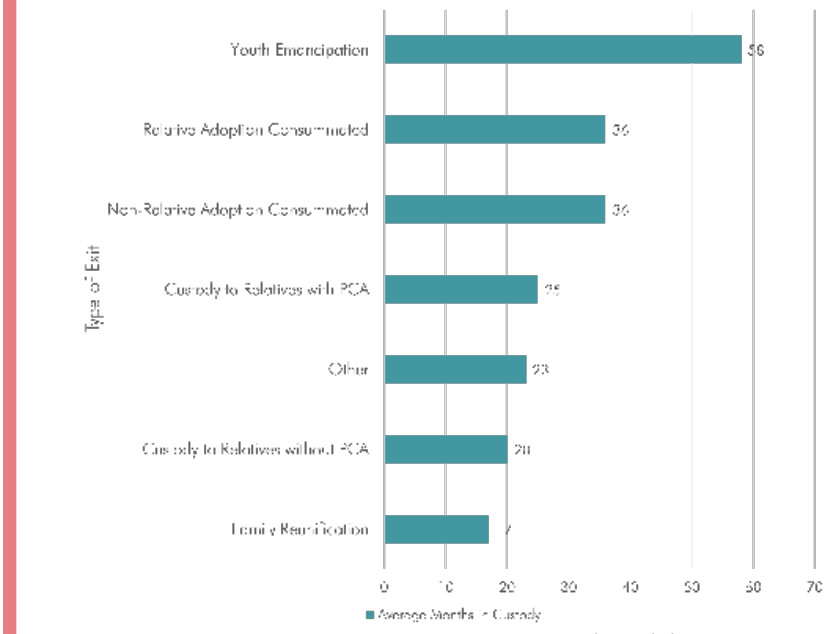


Figure 25. Average Time in State Custody While Awaiting Permament Living Arrangement, Harris County, 2022 [xxix]

Children spend an average of 30 months in state custody. Children who exit through family reunification have the shortest average of 17 months, while children exiting through youth emancipation spend an average of almost 5 years in the custody of the state.[123] There has been a decrease in removals during the family preservation stage and they occur during family substitute care or the reunification stage.[124]

Children who spend significant time in state custody are at a higher risk of running away and experiencing

other adverse childhood experiences. Of the total 2,125 documented victims of sex trafficking in 2020, 4.7% were in foster care and 16.4% were runaway/homeless youth.[125] The Houston region received 63 complaints in 2022, with the greatest proportion of complaints regarding the rights of children and youth in foster care.[126] Youth often report frustrations in the system or a desire to be in a different home environment as their primary reasons for running away following recovery.[127]

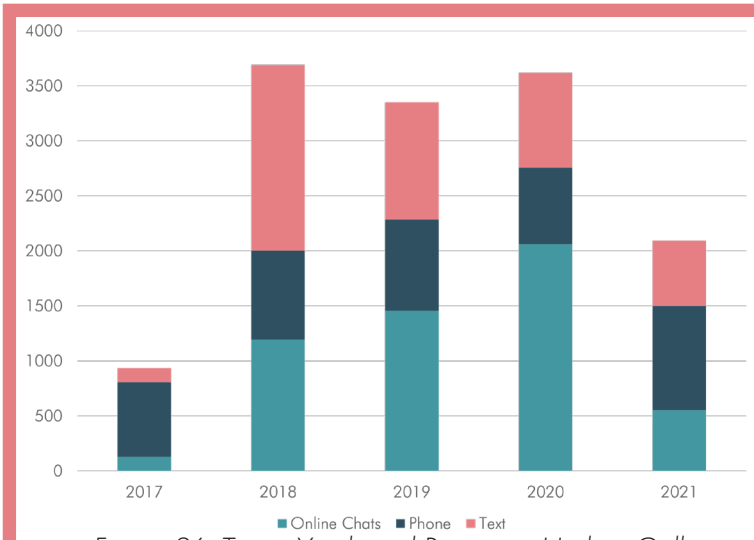


Figure 26. Texas Youth and Runaway Hotline Calls, 2020 [xxx]

Aging out of the foster care system often leaves 18-year-old "adults" without a support system and at a higher risk for qualifying as Opportunity Youth (See OY). There are currently 994 Harris County youth eligible and serving in the Preparation for Adult Living (PAL) program, which allows youth as young as 16 to qualify for services that will prepare them for adult living. The program covers areas such as housing and transportation and job readiness, and provides support services like GED courses or counseling.[128]

A Path Forward - Foster Care

The Texas Legislature should focus on preventing child maltreatment, while providing resources to struggling families that would successfully prevent family separation. The state spends over 17 times more on child protective services than the amount budgeted for prevention and early intervention services. Texas should prioritize keeping families together but must provide families with the proper support.

The Texas Legislature should:

- Increase funding for prevention and early intervention services;
- Increase financial and legal supports to families in need to prevent removals
- Improve data transparency through monthly data reporting on child protection;
- Improve support for our child protection workforce.[129]

HEALTH

HEALTH CARE COVERAGE

The quality of a child's health can have a lifetime impact. Children who are healthy are better learners, have better educational outcomes and can access future opportunities. A healthy start is essential for a strong foundation and begins with a healthy mother and healthy pregnancy. As a child grows, it is important that they have access to quality health care, timely vaccinations and nutritious foods. Unfortunately, there are several barriers that make the path to health difficult for Texas's most vulnerable children. We must continue to create policies that enable children to grow up in a healthy environment no matter their neighborhood, school district, or economic status.

Children with healthcare coverage have improved access to needed services, medications and preventative care.[130] Texas children can be covered through private or public health insurance programs.

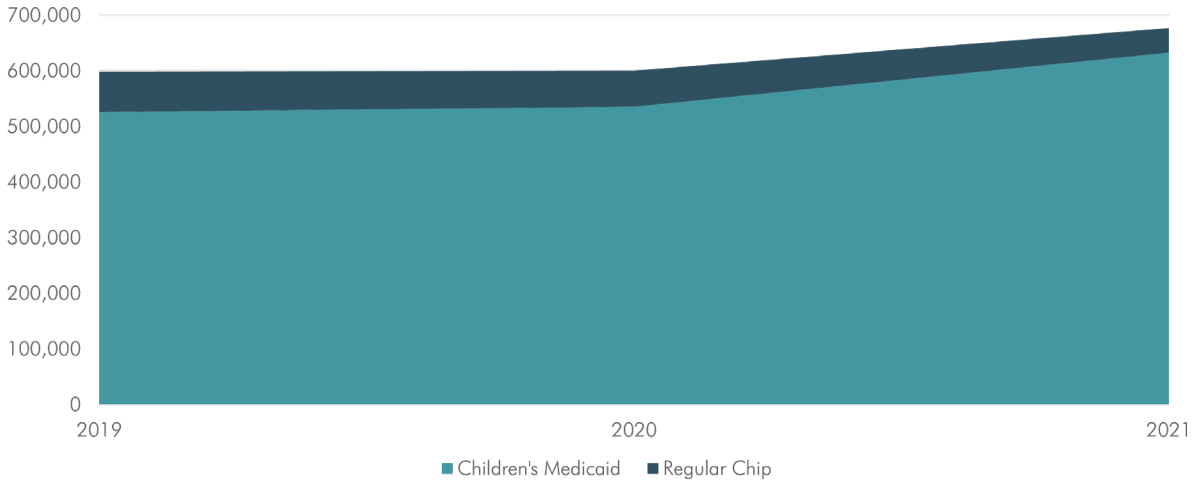


Figure 26. Children's Statewide CHIP and Medicaid Caseload, 2019-2021[xxxi]

However, 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 healthcare coverage. Texas continues to have the largest number of uninsured children in the country at 930,000 children.[131] However, progress is being made.

Between 2019 and 2021, Texas saw statistically significant improvement in the number or rate of uninsured children. During this time, 65,000 children gained coverage, a 0.9% increase, with more than 3.5 million children enrolled in either Children's Medicaid or CHIP.[132] In 2021, Harris County had 633,138 children enrolled in Medicaid and 43,810 enrolled in CHIP.[133] Unfortunately, many families struggle to maintain coverage under Medicaid due to re-enrollment requirements that require a financial review that burdens low-income families with constant paperwork. Streamlined processes that allow for cross communication across public benefits could help limit this burden.

Access to health insurance and comprehensive quality care is essential for a healthy child, but racial and ethnic disparities exist in healthcare coverage. In Texas, 15% of Hispanic children are uninsured compared to 8% of white, non-Hispanic children.[134] And in the United States, more than 1 in 4 immigrant children did not have health coverage in 2019 (25.5% compared to 5.1% of native-born children).[135] Due to the current 5-year bar, immigrants across the United States with Lawful Permanent Resident (LPR) status must wait 5 years before accessing supports like CHIP, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Texas Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid and Supplemental Security Income (SSI). In Texas, over 210,000 children have a parent with LPR status. While the 5-year bar in Texas does not preclude children and pregnant women from access to Medicaid and CHIP, it does prevent access to food assistance programs such as SNAP. Nutritional health can have a significant impact on a child's development and health outcomes.

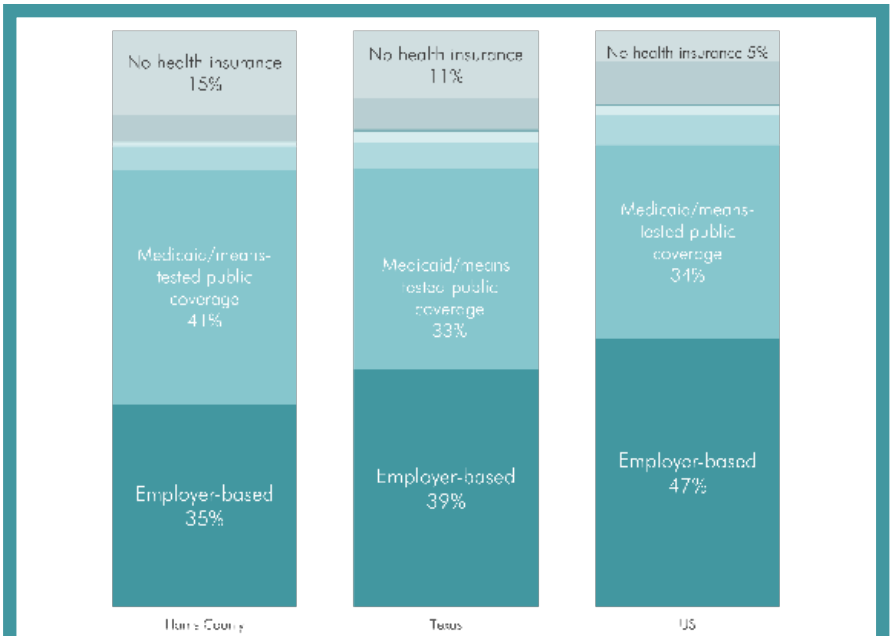


Figure 27. Health Insurance Coverage Under 19 Years Old, 2021[xxxii]

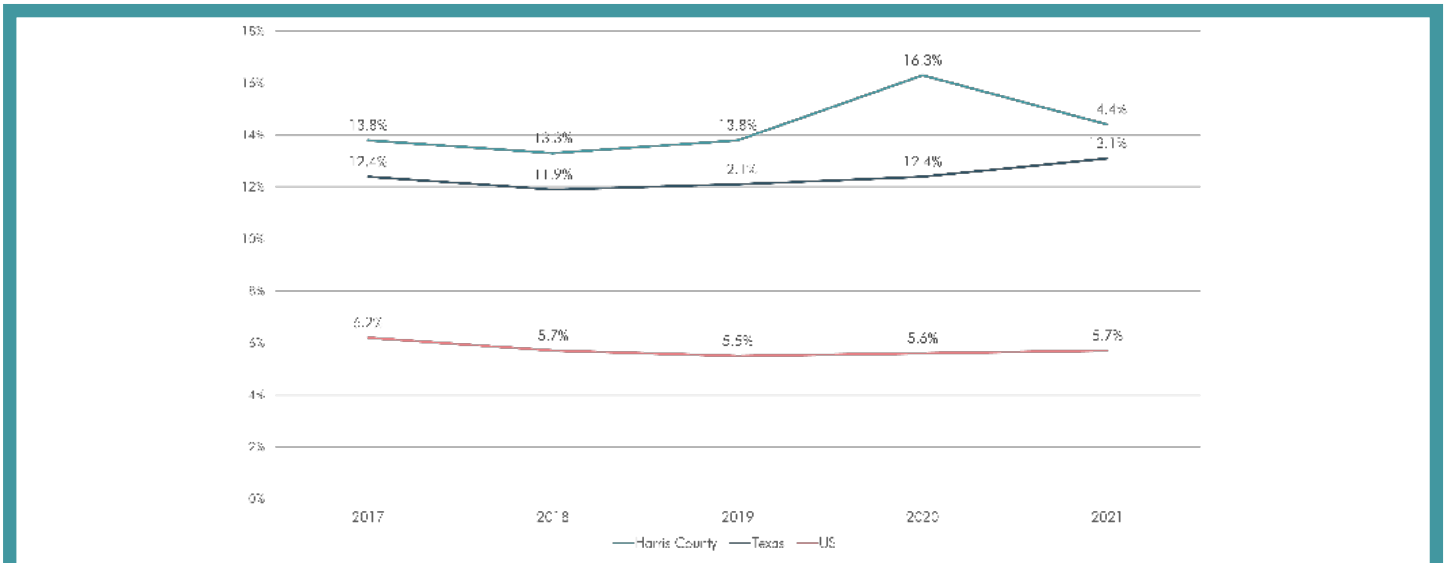


Figure 28. Unisured Rates for Children 6-18, Harris County[xxxiii]

The New American Economy found that 17.4% of immigrants in Houston received Medicare or Medicaid, compared to 29.4% of U.S.-born residents.[136] Research has found that children with immigrant parents are twice as likely to be uninsured compared to those with U.S. citizen parents.[137] A child's overall health is linked to that of their parents. Therefore, if a parent is uninsured or ineligi-

ble for benefits, their children are also less likely to be insured or enrolled even if their children have legal status.[138]

A Path Forward - Health Coverage

- Fully fund critical health programs for women and children, including Medicaid and CHIP.
- Improve the efficiency of Medicaid renewals for families by having the state use reliable third-party databases to reverify a child's eligibility without making a family do redundant paperwork.
- Improve enrollment of eligible children in health coverage, such as Medicaid or Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) through targeted efforts focused on the most vulnerable.

CHILD FOOD INSECURITY

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines a food insecure household as one that was uncertain of having, or unable to acquire, at some time during the year, enough food to meet the needs of all their family members because they had insufficient money or other resources for food.[139] Food insecurity is one way we measure how many people cannot afford food.

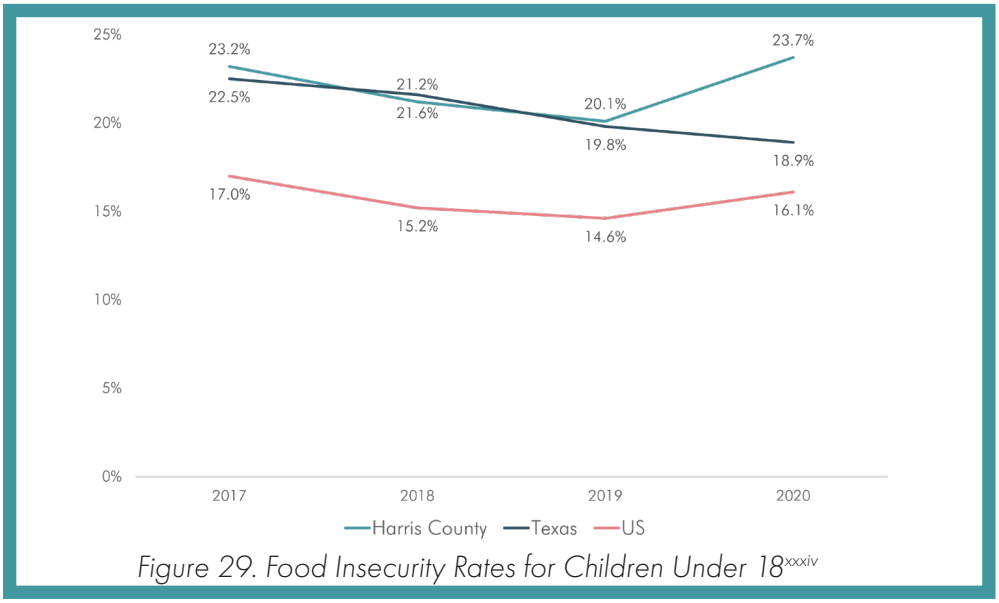


Figure 29. Food Insecurity Rates for Children Under 18[xxxiv]

Many Texans struggle to meet their basic needs which often results in food insecurity. The causes of food insecurity are complex and layered, however the most common cause of food insecurity is a low income.

In 2020, 23.7% of children in Harris County, or 295,900 children, were food insecure. In Texas, 18.9% of children or 1,395,890 children were food insecure.[140] A survey conducted by the USDA shows U.S. households with children headed by a single woman, non-Hispanic Black households, Hispanic households and households in the South are at a higher risk of being food insecure.[141]

Among food insecure children in Harris County, 73% are estimated to be income eligible for federal nutrition programs (income at or below 185%), leaving 27% likely ineligible for nutrition programs that could fill the food gap.[142] Federal nutrition programs are an essential support for food insecure families. Proper nutrition and food intake is critical for a child's early growth and development. Food insecurity adversely impacts physical, cognitive and social-emotional development. Children who experience hunger are at an increased risk of poor mental health, lower academic performance and can often lag behind in social and emotional skills.[143]

Thankfully there are federal programs designed to address food insecurity: the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Women, Infants and Children (WIC), the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and school and summer meal programs. These meal programs provide nutrition, education and supplementation to low-income families and strive to stabilize food insecurity issues.

SNAP is an essential support for working families. In 2021, SNAP helped to feed a monthly aver-

age of 482,588 children under 5 and 1,241,567 children aged 5 and older in Texas.[144] In Harris County, 614,894 families were enrolled in SNAP in 2021.[145] Unfortunately, 1 in 5 Texas families with children eligible for SNAP benefits are not receiving them.[146]

In fact, after more than a decade of increasing enrollment numbers, between 2016-2019, enrollment in benefit programs in Texas dropped significantly, including a 13.5% drop in SNAP enrollment between December 2017 and April 2019. A qualitative review found that one contributing factor to this significant drop was changes in immigration policies that caused many mixed-status families to fear enrolling even their U.S.-citizen children for benefits, resulting in fewer children receiving nutritional support.[147]

The WIC program is an essential support for pregnant women and young children and is designed to promote healthy birth outcomes and early child development by providing food packages, health screenings, referrals, breastfeeding promotion and support, and nutrition education for low-income pregnant, breastfeeding and postpartum women, infants and children up to 5 years of age.[148] In fiscal year 2020-2021, an average of 315,686 Texas children received WIC benefits each month.[149]

The federal Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is a non-pricing meal service option for schools and school districts in low-income areas. CEP allows schools in high-poverty areas to serve breakfast and lunch at no cost to all enrolled students without collecting household applications.[150] During the 2019-2020 school year, 3,740 out of the 5792 (or 65%) eligible and near eligible schools were enrolled in CEP in Texas.[151] In Harris County, 435 out of 744 schools were enrolled, resulting in 17.2% of Harris County students being covered by CEP. However, if all schools eligible for CEP participated, an additional 300,284 or 16.2% of students would receive breakfast and lunch at no cost.[152] CEP expansion should continue to be a priority to ensure that Texas children can have access to healthy and nutritious meals.

A Path Forward- Food Insecurity

- Expand the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) for high-poverty U.S. schools and school districts to serve school breakfast and lunch at no cost to all enrolled students by lowering the eligibility threshold for CEP from 40% to 25% of the school population eligible for free or reduced cost lunch. This would expand automatic enrollment in the program and increase program funding. By doing so, lawmakers could strengthen CEP and help provide free school meals to an additional 9 million kids.
- Allow internships and college credit hours to count towards SNAP eligibility for college students.

VACCINATIONS

The development of vaccines is one of the most significant public health achievements of the 20th century. From the time they are born, children receive immunizations to protect them from infectious diseases that could have lifelong consequences and/or lead to death. The COVID-19 pandemic solidified the importance of vaccinations as a key public health strategy that plays a vital role in preventing the spread of infectious disease. The vaccine schedule recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for children aged 19 to 35 months is designed to protect infants and children early in life when they are the most vulnerable.[153] While there is a high eventual completion rate of the recommended vaccination schedule, it is estimated that nearly 75% of children across the country do not receive vaccines at the recommended time; meaning a significant number of children are under-vaccinated.[154] Vaccines also protect other children who are medically fragile, lack access to preventative care or are too young to receive a vaccine by creating "herd immunity" among a community making it more difficult for a disease to spread.

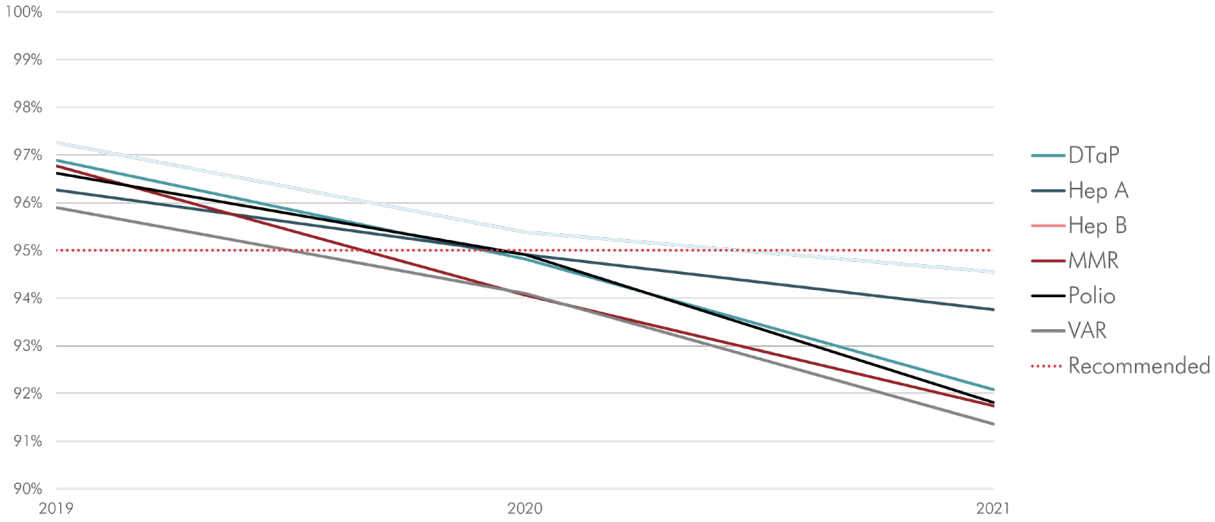


Figure 30. Vaccination Rates for Harris County Kindergartners, 2019-2021[xxxv]

School vaccine requirements often serve as a safety net for children who have not received their recommended immunizations prior to entering school and serve to protect Texas school children and ensure that they are healthy and ready to learn. Texas trend data shows that immunization rates are decreasing, and conscientious exemptions are increasing. 95% coverage is recommended to maintain herd immunity for highly infectious diseases such as measles.[155]

In the 2021-2022 school year, immunization coverage in Texas was above 95% for only one vaccine in Kindergarten: Hepatitis B. In 7th grade, immunization coverage was above 95% for all vaccines except for the tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis (Tdap) and meningococcal ACWY (MCV4) vaccines. Immunization delinquency rates for kindergarten students have also increased, with four vaccines now having delinquency rates over 3%, most likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

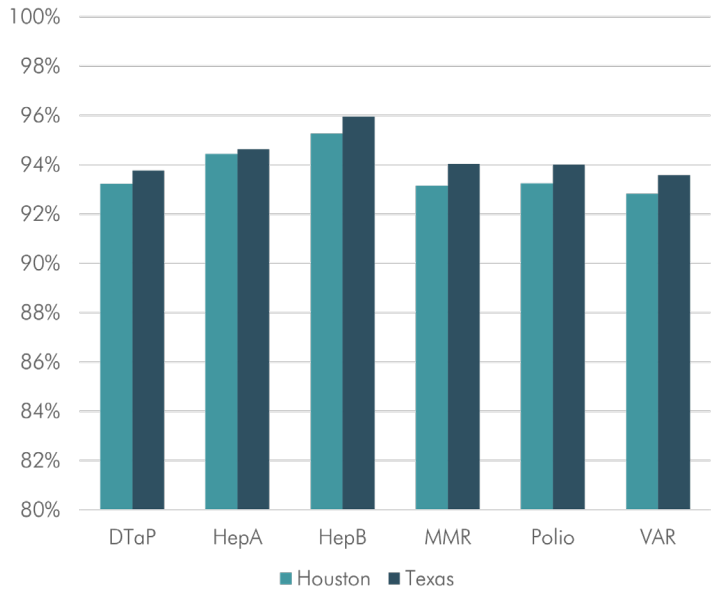


Figure 31. Vaccination Rates for Harris County vs. Texas Kindergartners, 2021-22 [xxxvi]

Rates for conscientious exemptions increased in 2021-2022 by about 0.5% for most vaccines and are now between 2% and 2.5%.[156] This trend suggests that there is a continued risk for increased exemptions resulting in the loss of herd immunity for school settings and an increased risk to children's health. When parents "opt-out" of vaccine requirements, vulnerable subsets of the population are put at risk.

A Path Forward - Vaccinations

- Protect current requirements for immunizations, including requirements for public school entry
- Reestablish strategic Texas Vaccines for Children sites that closed due to COVID-19, but that were effective previously to improve childhood and COVID-19 vaccination rates.

MENTAL HEALTH

Children and adolescents are facing mental health challenges at alarming rates. Exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, more youth are struggling with poor mental health. In 2021, more than a third (37%) of United States high school students reported they experience poor mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic and 44% reported they persistently felt sad or hopeless.[157] Among youth 12-17 years of age, 13.8% reported suffering from at least one major depressive episode (MDE) in the past year and 9.7% coped with severe major depression.[158] Childhood depression is more likely to continue into adulthood if left untreated. Unfortunately, only half of the children with pediatric major depression are diagnosed before adulthood.[159]

Youth with poor mental health may struggle with social relationships, academic performance and decision making. Mental health is also often associated with other health and behavioral risks such as substance use, high-risk sexual behaviors and experiencing violence.[160] Among Texas youth, 38.3% reported feeling sad or hopeless almost every day for 2 weeks in a row and 18.9% seriously considered attempting suicide within the past 12 months. These numbers are up from 2013, when 28.3% of Texas youth reported feeling sad or hopeless.[161]

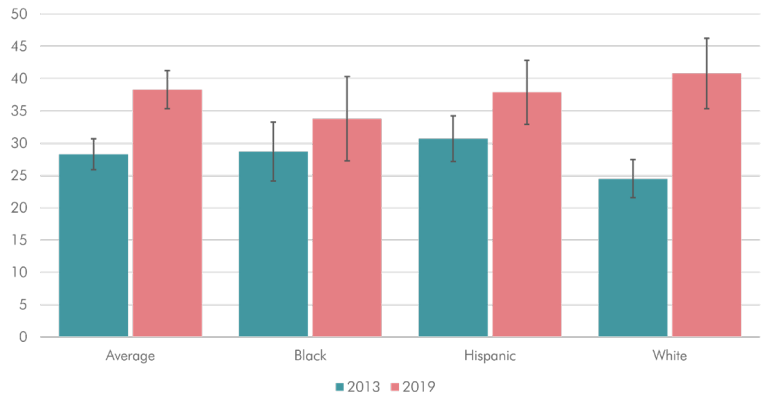


Figure 32. Percent of Texas Youth Who Felt Sad or Hopeless[xxxvii]

According to Mental Health America (MHA), 59.6% of American youth with major depression do not receive any mental health treatment. The prevalence of untreated youth with depression in Texas is 67.1%, much higher than the national average.[162]

In fact, overall access to mental health support in Texas is concerning. Based on MHA access rankings that indicate how much access to mental health care exists within a state, Texas ranks at the bottom of state access at 50/51 in overall access to mental health services with a mental health workforce ratio of 880:1.[163] Continued investment in the mental health workforce is necessary to

support the mental health of Harris County youth and address mental health concerns that have been increased by the COVID-19 pandemic.[164]

A Path Forward - Mental Health

- Increase access to school-based behavioral services so more districts can participate, and more students can receive services.
- Set minimum required mental health counselor to student ratios in public schools.
- Provide long-term funding and career pathways for schools to hire more mental health professionals.

MATERNAL HEALTH

Health care coverage provides access to preventative health services to support overall well-being and improve maternal, infant and child health outcomes. Unfortunately, there continues to be a high rate of underinsured women in Texas. In 2020, 24% (around 1 in 4 women) of childbearing age were uninsured in Texas.[165]

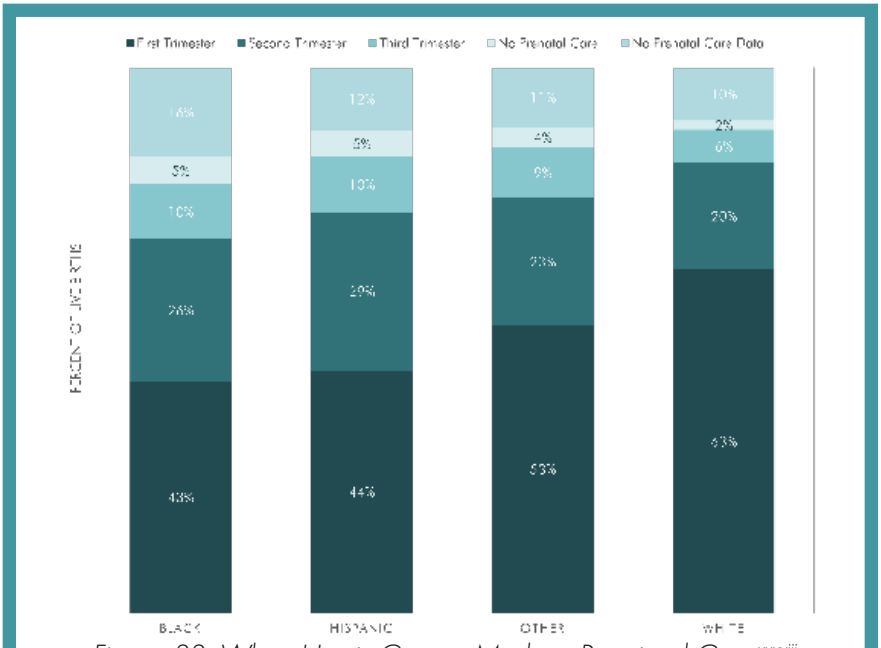


Figure 33. When Harris County Mothers Received Care[xxxviii]

Public insurance helps fill potential health coverage gaps. In 2020, 50% (183,157) of births in Texas were financed by Medicaid.[166] In Harris County, 47,201 pregnant women were enrolled in Medicaid in 2021.[167] This coverage is essential in ensuring the best outcomes for mother and child. It is recommended that an expectant mother receive 12 months of prenatal care followed by 12 months of post-partum care. Consistent and equitable access to healthcare during pregnancy and following childbirth is essential to addressing pregnancy-related health complications, identifying post-partum depression and preventing maternal deaths.

Adequate prenatal care allows providers to identify health problems that can cause future complications and monitor fetal growth and development. Prenatal care provides an opportunity for existing or new health conditions to be managed, such as high blood pressure and diabetes, which can reduce complications for the infant and mother.

Inadequate prenatal care is defined as the percentage of women who received care beginning in the fifth month or later or less than the appropriate number of visits for the infant's gestational age.[168] Unfortunately, 19.8% of pregnant women in Texas received inadequate prenatal care in 2021. The number is even higher for black women - only 27.8% of black women received inadequate prenatal care.[169]

Maternal Mortality

The spotlight on maternal mortality in the United States has continued to shine over the last few years as recognition that the United States has the highest rate of maternal mortality among developed countries.[170] Each year, the United States experiences over 800 maternal deaths with significant

racial and ethnic disparities. On average, American Indian/Alaska Native and Black women are 2 to 3x more likely to die from a pregnancy-related cause than white women. These deaths are largely preventable.

A recent report released by the Texas Maternal Mortality and Morbidity Review Committee (MMMRC) determined that there was at least some chance for preventability in 90% of reviewed 2019 case cohort pregnancy-related deaths.[171] Additionally, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that two-thirds of maternal deaths in the United States are preventable supporting that there is still significant opportunity to intervene in these unnecessary deaths.[172]

The primary causes of pregnancy-related death ranged from hemorrhage (25%) followed by mental health conditions (17%), non-cerebral thrombotic embolism (12%) and injury (10%). The final pregnancy-related mortality ratio in 2013 found that Black women in Texas bear the greatest burden for maternal death with a pregnancy-related mortality ratio over twice that of non-Hispanic white women and over 4x higher than Hispanic women.[173] Although final 2019 data is not currently available from the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS), the preliminary assessment of the 2019 cohort suggests that the trend in disparities will continue.

Additional consideration in counting maternal deaths also needs to be given to maternal near-misses. A maternal near-miss (MNM) refers to a woman who nearly died but survived a complication that occurred during pregnancy, childbirth or within 42 days of termination of pregnancy.[174] It is estimated that there are over 50,000 near-misses each year in the United States.[175] Maternal near-misses are an indicator of overall maternal health and maternal healthcare and highlight a bigger health and systems issue.

Preterm Birth and Infant Mortality

Much like the maternal mortality rate, Texas continues to see elevated rates of infant mortality. In 2020, in Harris County, 5.72 out of every 1,000 infants died before their first birthday. This is higher than the infant mortality rate of Texas which sits at 5.29 infants out of every 1,000.[176] Texas has made great progress in reducing these rates, but Black families in Texas are still disproportionately impacted by infant mortality. Within Houston, mortality rates for infants of Black mothers varied eight-fold from 3.3 to 28.1 deaths per 1,000 births in zip codes 77077 and 77026.[177] This variation can be explained by social, environmental and economic factors at the community level.

Premature birth - a birth occurring before the 37th week of pregnancy - puts infants at an increased risk of breathing problems, feeding difficulties, developmental delays, vision and hearing problems and cerebral palsy.[178] Infants born preterm are more likely to enter the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) and require additional medical intervention that can cause significant financial strain for a family.

After a small drop in preterm birth rates in 2020, preterm birth rates have continued to climb. In

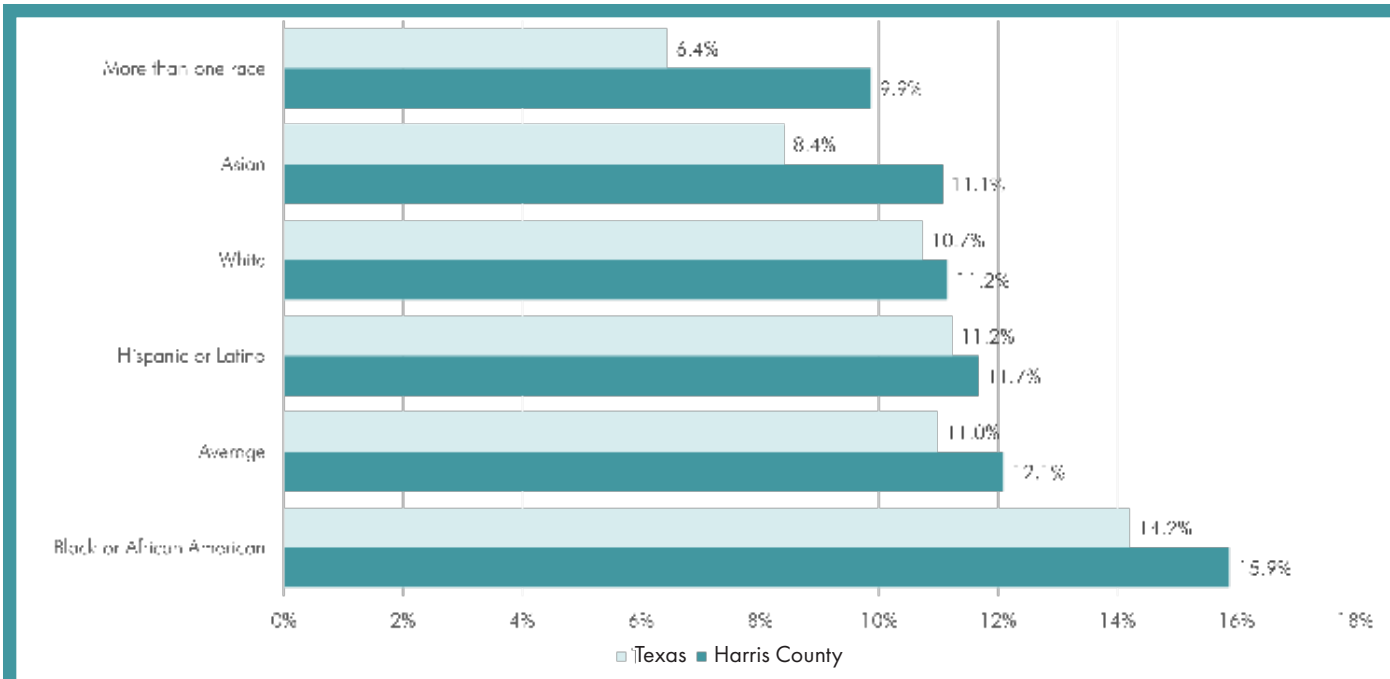


Figure 34. Percent of Births Born Preterm by Race, 2016-2021[xxxix]

2021, the overall preterm birth rate in Harris County was 12.3%, up from 11.9% in 2020. The overall preterm birth rate for Texas was 11.4%, up from 10.8% in 2020.[179] Significant disparities exist among the preterm birth rates by race/ethnicity. In Texas, the preterm birth rate among Black women is 41% higher than the rate among all other women (MOD report card quote). Prenatal care helps identify women at high risk of preterm birth and ensures that they receive the appropriate care needed to provide the best outcome for both mother and baby.

A Path Forward - Maternal Health

- Adopt recommendations made by the Texas Maternal Mortality and Morbidity Task Force to reduce maternal mortality and improve access to prenatal and postpartum care, particularly in at-risk populations
- Texas legislators should extend Medicaid coverage to 12 months postpartum to ensure that all mothers have access to health care and services following the birth of their child.

CLOSING

As we close out another year of assessing the quality of life of Houston's children, we are faced with many of the same challenges, but our hope and vision for the future is unwavering. We continue to work towards a future where all children and their families have access to basic needs, healthcare, education, and equal opportunity to succeed and thrive.

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About CHILDREN AT RISK

Established in 1989, CHILDREN AT RISK is an organization dedicated to improving the quality of life of Texas children through strategic research, public policy analysis, innovation, community education, collaboration, and advocacy. We envision a world where children's needs are made a priority, and where children and their families have the resources needed to truly thrive. In order to bring this vision to fruition, CHILDREN AT RISK focuses its efforts on parent education, public education, child trafficking, and child health. We would like to extend a special recognition and thanks to the United Way of Greater Houston for generously funding this publication.