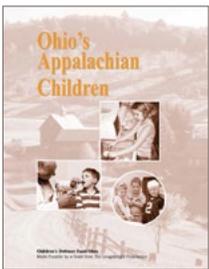


# Introduction

Ohio's 32 Appalachian counties stretch from the shoreline of Lake Erie (Ashtabula County) to the hills of Belmont and Monroe counties and then wind west to the suburbs of Cincinnati (Clermont). The families of Appalachian Ohio are steeped in a timeless tradition. Long held values of hard work, self-sufficiency, and close-knit families have provided a foundation for strong communities. Generations have called this region home. The land is naturally beautiful, though rocky, unforgiving, and not easy to travel.

Historically, communities sustained themselves on coal mining jobs, careers in manufacturing, and local trade tied to personal relationships. Today, those opportunities are more scarce than in decades past. Children bear the brunt of the poverty that now grips so much of the region.



CDF-Ohio began our investigation into Appalachian Ohio with our 2001 report—*Ohio's Appalachian Children*—which provided a first-ever comprehensive look into the well-being of the region's children. The region continues to suffer many of the same challenges today—poverty, health disparities, and pervasive food insecurity to name a few—that existed in 2001. While there are signs of hope, the passage of time has made many of the problems more acute.

Our interconnected and digital world further isolates Appalachian households that do not have access to the Internet. And most recently, a drug epidemic has ravaged entire Appalachian communities with a wake of babies born exposed to opiates.

It is a critical time for Appalachian Ohio. CDF-Ohio has a long commitment to this region. We present this report—*Ohio's Appalachian Children at a Crossroads: A Roadmap for Action*—to bring awareness to the region's current challenges and, more importantly, to promising practices and recommendations for action.

The report provides a current snapshot of the well-being of children in Ohio's Appalachian region. It begins with a demographic overview then discusses indicators in the areas of economic stability, birth and babies, early childhood education and access, primary and secondary public education, and health and nutrition. To the extent that comparative data are available, the report examines changes in the indicators since the first edition of this report was published in 2001. Based on report findings, we identify and prioritize current needs and make long-term recommendations for policy, outreach, community action, and regional focus. We believe with the right public and private partnerships and investments the region can seize the opportunities and surmount the challenges.

## Every Appalachian Ohio Child Counts

Approximately 1 in 6 Ohio children live in Appalachian Ohio. These 450,000 children are the future of the region. In order to sustain future economic prosperity, the region's children must be career ready. Economists predict that baby boomer retirements will leave our state industries scrambling for skilled workers at the same time that manufacturing is resurging due to jobs returning from overseas. Over the next twenty years, it will take virtually every child in the region to replace retiring workers and that does not account for our projected growth in manufacturing employment.<sup>1</sup>

We must consider our investment in each child a priority. We cannot continue to believe that children who live in poverty, and who experience sustained hunger and poor health outcomes will be ready to learn and will successfully enter our workforce. Knowing the critical part each child will play in our economic future, it is time for a real commitment to break from the routine and use *Ohio's Appalachian Children at a Crossroads: A Roadmap for Action* for urgent change.



The well-being and future of Appalachia's children is at a crossroads. Let's build on the strengths and assets of the region by focusing on the most important asset of all—Ohio's Appalachian children.

## Key Report Highlights

1. **Economic stability of children and families has not improved.** The child population in Appalachian Ohio has decreased in the last 15 years, but a higher percentage of children live in poverty. Appalachia as a region and many counties within the region have the highest child poverty in all of Ohio. Families continue to have household incomes well below the rest of the state, and unemployment remains higher than statewide figures.
2. **Babies in the region are at increased risk.** The region has seen a rise in the proportion of babies born at low birthweight since 2000. Like the rest of the state, babies in Appalachian Ohio face high rates of infant mortality compared to national levels. Pregnant women use tobacco at higher rates than pregnant women statewide. The region has seen alarming increases in the number of babies born with exposure to opiate drugs.
3. **High-quality early childhood care and education (ECE) is critical for children, but is challenged** by relatively higher numbers of children per available space and difficulties on the business and workforce side of providing services. A high-quality early childhood education has not consistently been seen as crucial to a child's development.
4. **Results are mixed for educational outcomes for primary and secondary students.** Children are meeting the key milestones of kindergarten readiness, third grade reading proficiency and high school graduation on par with the rest of Ohio. Appalachian school districts are leading the state in students earning credentials and college credit while still in high school. However, students from Appalachia are significantly more likely than their peers statewide to need to take remedial coursework in college. Fewer adults in the region have completed four-year degrees.
5. **There are clear health disparities between Appalachian children and children statewide.** Children in Appalachia face shortages of primary, dental, and mental health providers in addition to long distances to children's hospitals. Health issues such as childhood obesity, food insecurity, and lack of dental care disproportionately affect Appalachian children.