

Towards the Other Side: Past the Pandemic and Beyond to an Equitable Recovery

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Massachusetts children and families are beginning to look forward to the other side of the health and economic crises of 2020.

But moving beyond the events of this past year will not mean that we leave the impacts behind. For many, the year of disruption and loss will leave its mark, especially for children of color who have been hardest hit as the pandemic and economic disruption exposed and made worse long-standing racial and economic inequities.

Fortunately, newly-available, one-time federal funds will help begin to repair the damage created by the pandemic, especially if they are well-targeted to the communities most in need. But the Commonwealth should also make a longer-term effort to commit resources to address the pre-existing conditions that made the pandemic so devastating in the first place.

Looking more closely at disparities across the state elevates some of those pre-existing conditions in Massachusetts. Prior to the pandemic, by certain measures Massachusetts children seemed to be doing relatively well. The just-released Annie E. Casey KIDS COUNT measure of child well-being ranks Massachusetts #1, based on 16 health, education, economic, and community indicators. Yet a deeper look at those measures showed troubling trends even back then, before the pandemic hit. These trends reflect the [impacts of policy choices](#) implemented over decades. Generations of wealth and income inequality, unequal access to jobs, housing, or child care create noticeable chasms in how well our children have been doing, especially if we look at the data by race or by geography.

In 2019 in Massachusetts:

Key Takeaways

- Massachusetts ranked #1 nationally in measures of child well-being, but the state's successes have been uneven.
- Even before the pandemic, poverty rates for children of color and for children in Gateway Cities were double or more the statewide average.
- The pandemic hit communities unevenly, and made disparities more stark.
- Federal funds will help repair the damage caused by the pandemic.
- The state budget will be a critical tool for building beyond recovery towards true equity.

- One in eight children (12%) lived in households with incomes [below the poverty line](#), but the number was *twice that or even more* for Black or Latinx children.
- In some of the Gateway Cities, as many as *one in three* children lived [below the poverty line](#) – Fall River (31%), Holyoke (46%), New Bedford (30%), Springfield (39%).
- Three of ten children (31%) – 419,000 – lived in households spending at least 30% of their [income on housing](#). Almost *half* of Black or Latinx children lived in such households.
- Four of ten of the state’s three and four year olds (40%) [were not in preschool](#), but that number rose to *more than half* (54%) when looking just at Latinx children. More than one-half of the state’s population lives in what is known as a “[child care desert](#),” a community with very limited child care spots.
- Even with a #1 ranking nationally, more than half of the state’s [4th graders tested below proficient](#) on a national standardized reading level test, clearly not results any state would be proud of.



Then the pandemic hit, hitting hardest at lower-income essential workers and at people struggling in overcrowded housing. Child cares shut down and schools struggled to educate children in hybrid or remote classrooms. Of the 11 cities or towns with the [highest COVID incidence state-wide](#), *seven* are communities with overall [majority population of people of color](#). The economic downturn trailing the pandemic has had a particularly [deep impact](#) on women, on families with children, and on Black and Latinx households.

Over the course of the pandemic:

- Close to half of households with children in Massachusetts [lost employment income](#) since the onset of the pandemic. That number was as high as two-thirds for Latinx or Black households.
- Existing housing challenges became even more acute. About 1 of 6 households with children reported that they could be [unable to pay their rent or mortgage](#) in the next month. This number for Black and Latinx households was twice that of White households.
- Already scarce child care slots became more scarce. There are fewer available child care slots now than there were even before the pandemic. The state’s Dept. of Early Education and Care [still reports](#) a wait list of about 11,000 pre-school aged children seeking care.
- For children in Black and Latinx households internet service and a computer or digital device were [less likely to be available for educational purposes](#) than for children in white households.

Just as policy choices created the conditions that challenged communities before the pandemic, now is the time to target resources that will help us recover from the pandemic. This is also our opportunity to move beyond the pandemic into a future Commonwealth with equity at the core.

Policymakers could turn to their most potent policy tool – the state budget – to overturn generations of accumulated inequality. The state budget is the single largest piece of legislation each year, and it touches every single person in the Commonwealth. But we need to make sure that the budget has the resources it needs to take on this task.

Among the most direct ways to build back to a better future are to invest in jobs, infrastructure, and education for our children and young adults.

- Ensure that every family has enough to make ends meet to address [decades](#) of income inequality. Proven strategies such as a providing a [guaranteed income](#), expanding the [Earned Income Tax Credit](#) or Child Tax Credit (especially including supports regardless of immigration status) are initiatives that the Commonwealth could pursue.
- Target infrastructure investments to the communities that have suffered from historic underinvestment. Whether this is supporting housing and homeownership, expanding [free public transit](#), providing universal high quality [child care](#), fully funding our [K-12 schools](#), or providing [affordable higher education](#), adequate funding through the state budget is a critical next step.

Whether it's addressing economic inequality, housing instability, unaffordable child care, or schools that cannot meet the needs of all students, the Commonwealth will need a new way forward to move beyond recovery. To sustain this investment, we will need to look beyond [tens of billions in federal dollars](#) coming to Massachusetts. Emergency needs created by the pandemic can be well-met with this one-time support, but systemic inadequacies will need a commitment of systemic investment funded with ongoing sources of revenue.

The revenue the Commonwealth raises to support this investment should not itself perpetuate the inequities in the state's current tax system. There are a [variety of ways](#) to turn Massachusetts' "upside down" revenue system "right-side up." Policies such as increasing the tax rate on [unearned income](#), increasing the tax on [wealthy corporations](#), or raising revenues by increasing the income tax on [individuals who can most afford it](#) are all strategies for moving the Commonwealth past the pandemic and beyond to a more just and equitable future that puts everyone's well-being at the center.

