

2022

Arkansas Voters' Guide

*Keeping the focus on children's issues
during election season and beyond*



April 2022



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Put Your Advocacy Skills to Work in Election Season

For policy wonks like me, election years are exciting. Many policies and laws that don't often get much attention can become a major part of the election debate. That increases their importance for candidates, the media, and the public. But the opposite can also be true. Without advocacy from people like you, candidates can continually repeat talking points without saying much.

Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families is proud to work with a dedicated network of child advocates, like you, from around the state. And we know advocates are often looking for new opportunities to speak up for kids. In election years, there are many meaningful and fun ways you can advocate on the issues that have the biggest impact on the well-being of our state's children. We start this Voters' Guide with suggestions of how you can advocate this election year.

We also share updates and data on important issues the children and families of Arkansas are dealing with. Our last Voters' Guide was written in December 2019. As we enter the third year of the COVID-19 pandemic, we know a lot has changed. New problems have arisen, like product shortages and inflation. And longstanding problems, like health and economic disparities caused by racially and ethnically discriminatory laws and practices, have

gotten worse. But these problems have solutions. We suggest questions you can ask candidates to help get an understanding of where they stand on the issues. What their ideas are to build on what is working well for kids and families. And how they will address problems families are facing.

When the pandemic first started, I was heartened, but not surprised, to see how the child advocates of Arkansas quickly stepped up to the plate. Many of you provided support to families and lobbied for laws at the state and national level to help address the vital needs of children. This election year, we look forward to working with you once again to help raise awareness of issues that matter most to Arkansas's kids and families. We hope this Voters' Guide is a resource to you in that effort.

As I often say, children can't vote. They don't run for political office. They don't make political campaign contributions. And they don't host fundraisers for candidates or political parties. Yet children are the ones most impacted by the candidates who get elected and the decisions they make while in office. Thank you for your continued work on behalf of Arkansas's children.

Sincerely,

Rich Huddleston

Rich Huddleston, AACF Executive Director



4 Tips for Voters and Ways to Engage

- Elections are the cornerstone of our democracy, and they provide many opportunities for you to engage and participate as a voter and an advocate. From attending candidate events, volunteering on a voter registration drive, to of course, voting, there are many ways for you to exercise your rights and take part in the election process.
- Make sure your voter registration information is up to date at voterview.ar-nova.org/VoterView. There you can also find out where your voting location is and review a sample ballot where you can see what races and ballot measures to expect.
- Learn about the proposed state laws and constitutional amendments that will be on the ballot at University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension's (UAEX) website uaex.uada.edu/business-communities/voter-education/
- Develop questions for candidates based on the things you care most about.
- Do your research on candidates and their positions and ballot measures. In addition to the standard go-to methods for researching candidates (local news, candidate social media pages, and websites), you can also email or call the candidates to ask them their position on an issue or go to candidate forums. Local political parties host forums near the primary elections. And civic groups, like League of Women Voters, also host forums and invite candidates to speak at events. Many forums are often available on live streaming video. When researching ballot measures, in addition to checking out UAEX's website, visit the social media accounts of campaigns for and against measures. Share reliable information and events you find with your friends and family.
- Use elections as an opportunity to advocate on issues you care about. If there is an issue you are passionate about, and you want to advocate for it at the Capitol, you can ask questions at candidate forums to raise awareness about an

issue with the media and the public. You can also record candidates' responses at forums to remind them of election promises later on, if they are elected. (Elections are a busy time for candidates; they may forget some important statements they make).

- Consider volunteering in nonpartisan efforts. During election years, many civic and nonprofit organizations host voter registration drives and are always looking for volunteers to help. Ballot measure campaigns also look for volunteers to help collect signatures, to speak at events to help educate voters, and more. Check out the groups' websites to find out how you can connect.
- Go vote! And remind your friends, family, and colleagues to go vote. If you are able, give someone a ride to the polls, if they need it.
- Nonprofits can participate in election advocacy, but laws apply. Go to bolderadvocacy.org to find out more. You can also go AACF's advocacy guide to get more tips for nonprofit election advocacy.

Your Rights as a Voter

These organizations can assist you if you cannot access your polling place, are turned away from voting, or have other issues when exercising your right to vote.

American Civil Liberties Union

Voter Protection Hotline: 877-523-2792

Disability Rights Arkansas: 800-482-1174

Election Protection Coalition

Helpline: 866-687-8683

Para Español: Si se encuentra con dificultades al votar y necesita ayuda en Español, por favor contacte a Arkansas Unidos: 479-763-2822

Racial Equity and Inclusion

Racial identity should have no influence on how well a child fares in society. But it's clear that both historic and existing structural racism in our laws and policies have a negative impact on the lives of Black, Indigenous, and Other People of Color (BIPOC) children and families. Even when you control for socioeconomic, health, education, and other factors, racial disparities continue to exist. These include inequitable criminal justice policies that disproportionately incarcerate Black and Brown people compared to their White counterparts and restrictive property use and zoning laws that have led to the divestment and disenfranchisement of BIPOC communities.

The COVID-19 Pandemic has highlighted many more disparities. BIPOC communities have been more likely to be exposed to COVID-19, have more serious illness upon being admitted to the hospital, and have an increased risk of death. BIPOC communities are more likely to lack access to quality health care, have poorer general health, have lower educational attainment rates, and lack economic stability; all factors that have been identified to affect health outcomes.

These disparities pervade all aspects of life for BIPOC children and families. For example, in Arkansas, 39%

of our Black children and 27% of our Hispanic/Latino children live in poverty, compared to 16% of our White children. These figures are alarming, as children living in poverty are far more likely to lack stable housing, experience significant educational gaps, and suffer worse health outcomes. Children who grow up in poverty are also more likely to have trouble transitioning into stable, productive adults.

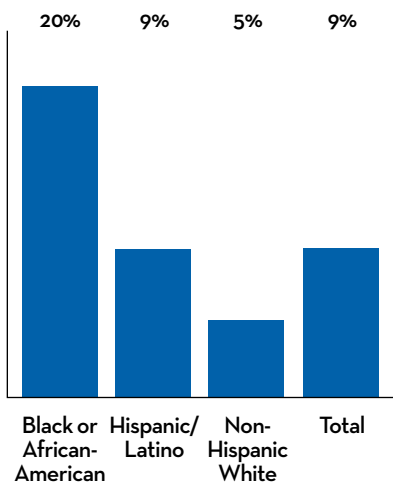
But there are policy options that can help children and families achieve more equitable outcomes like investment in early childhood education and afterschool programs, Earned Income Tax Credits, preventive health care, and hunger relief programs.

What to Ask Candidates

- What is your definition of racial equity?
- To what extent has pursuing racial equity and inclusion been a priority in your work, and how do you approach it?
- What do you think are the root causes of these and other disparities along racial and ethnic lines?
- How should Arkansas address the significant disparities in poverty rates of Black and Brown families compared to their White counterparts?

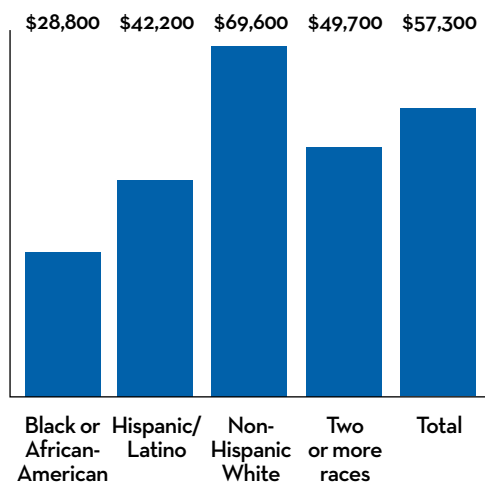
Extreme Poverty

Children in Extreme Poverty (50 Percent Poverty) by Race and Ethnicity in Arkansas, 2019



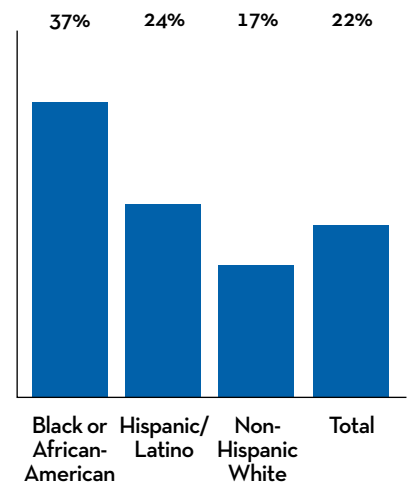
Household Income

Median Family Income Among Households with Children by Race and Ethnicity in Arkansas, 2019



Housing Cost

Children Living in Households with a High Housing Cost Burden by Race in Arkansas, 2019



Source: <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data#AR/2/0/char/0>

6 Family Economic Well-Being

Helping Working Families: We can do more than just protect programs that help our kids succeed. We can demand more on their behalf. A state Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) would allow low-income working families to keep more of what they earn and move up the income ladder. An EITC is proven to have long-term benefits for children’s health, educational outcomes, and even future career options and job security. The EITC is a straightforward way to help low-income families that also helps address the regressive nature of our state tax system. When all taxes are considered, including income, property and sales taxes, the top 1% pay less as a share of their income than those with lower incomes.

Protecting Programs Kids Need: Because many Arkansas jobs pay wages that are too low to meet the needs of families, many full-time working families

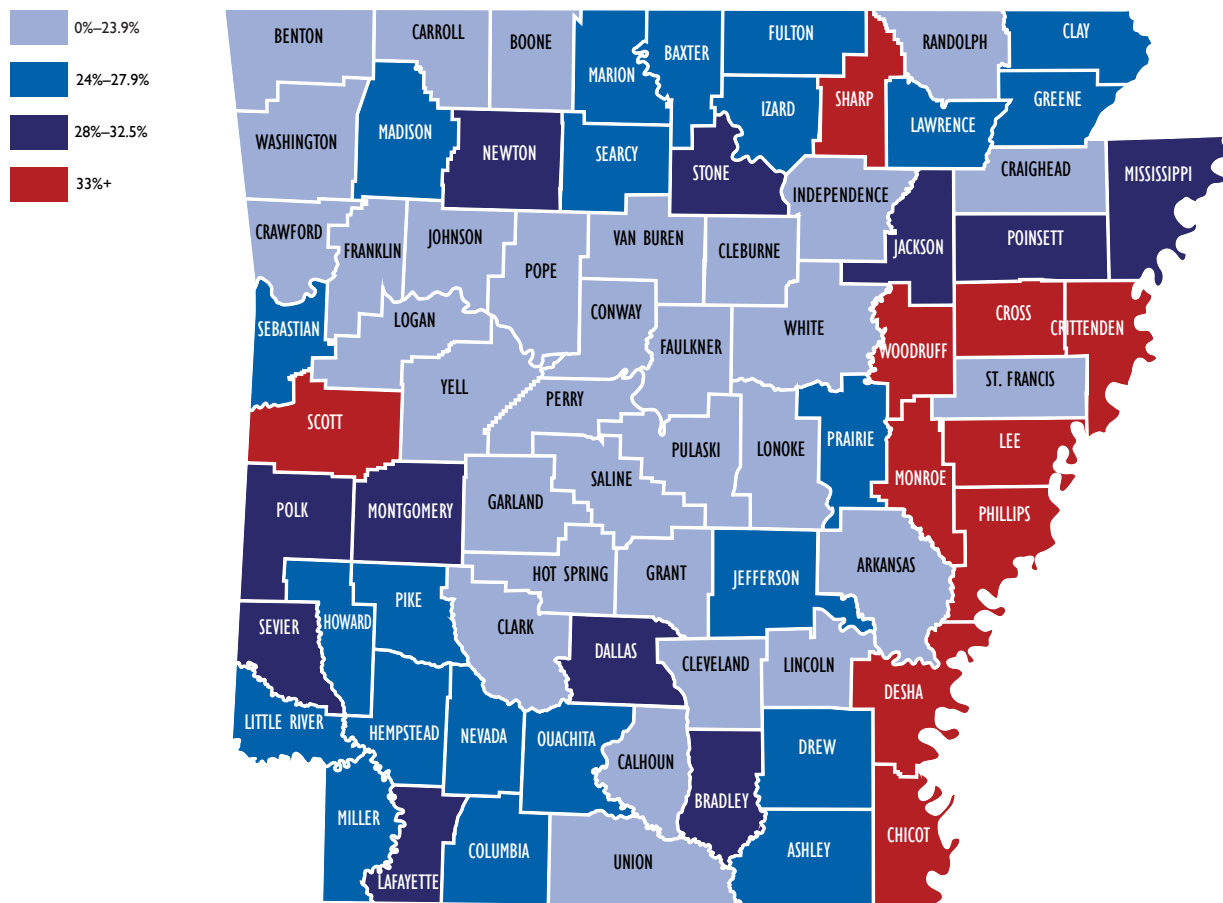
in the state live in poverty. About a quarter of the kids in Arkansas grow up in poverty and rely on social safety net programs, such as Medicaid or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly “Food Stamps”) to meet basic needs. Protecting these types of programs means protecting the futures and aspirations of all kids in Arkansas.

What to Ask Candidates

- What do you see as the biggest financial barriers preventing low-wage workers in Arkansas from getting ahead?
- What kinds of policies would you like to see help families who work full time but still can’t make ends meet?
- How will you protect social safety net programs that help low-income families in Arkansas meet their kids’ basic needs?

Arkansas Child Poverty Rates, by County, 2020

Percent of Children under 18 Living in Poverty



Source: <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/249-children-under-18-living-in-poverty?loc=5&clot=5#detailed/5/213-287/false/871/any/8458>

Early Childhood Education and Care

Early Childhood Education: Positive, encouraging adult-child interactions are important to high-quality early learning, both at home and classroom. Children who receive high-quality early childhood education (ECE) are better prepared to succeed in K-12, are more likely to go on to college, and see improved outcomes as adults. Because of the underfunding of the ECE system and the resulting low wages, the ECE workforce was already facing major challenges before the pandemic. Over the last several years, the sector has reported high levels of stress and elevated depression risk, difficulty attracting and retaining staff, lost revenue, and difficulty maintaining health and safety standards. COVID relief funds may have helped temporarily, but further support for the ECE workforce is necessary.

Build the birth to age 3 system: The first three years of a child's life affect all future learning, behavior, and health. This time period is the most sensitive for a child's developing brain and body, yet many families face substantial challenges finding child care during these years. Statewide, just 1 in 10 working parents can find quality, licensed care for their infant or toddler. This leads to many parents deciding to not reenter the workforce until their child reaches Pre-K. Growing our infant and toddler system would have an immediate impact on families across the state and would set our young children up for success in the later years.

What to Ask Candidates

- What are your thoughts on increasing funding to support high-quality infant and toddler programs?
- What are your thoughts about a bigger state investment in pre-k education?
- How would you work to address the challenges facing our early childhood workforce?



More than Half of Arkansas's Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Workforce has Less than a Bachelor's Degree, and Average Pay is Well Below Other State Averages

Education Level	Percentage
Less than a bachelor's degree without credentials	34.1%
Less than a bachelor's degree with credentials	28.6%
Any degree in unrelated field	6.4%
Bachelor's degree or higher in related field, regardless of credentials	30.7%

Average Pay Rate in Arkansas	Dollars
ECCE with Associate's degree without credentials	\$24,315
ECCE with Associate's degree with credentials	\$25,459
ECCE with Bachelor's degree in related field, regardless of credentials	\$32,240
All women in Arkansas	\$42,470
ECCE with Master's degree or higher in related field, regardless of credentials	\$40,206
Arkansas kindergarten teachers	\$45,850
All men in Arkansas	\$51,694

8 K-12 Education

American Rescue Plan: Through the American Rescue Plan (ARP), Arkansas received \$1.2 billion in new, one-time funding for K-12 education. School districts have until September 30, 2024, to spend their funds. To make a significant change in our education system, these new resources should be aimed at the students who need it most.

Learning Loss: Most experts believe that certain groups of students, including BIPOC children, children from low-income families, English language learners, and children with special education needs likely lost academic ground during the pandemic. A few reasons for this learning loss include access to digital devices and the internet, digital literacy of parents, and the economic impacts of the pandemic on students' families.

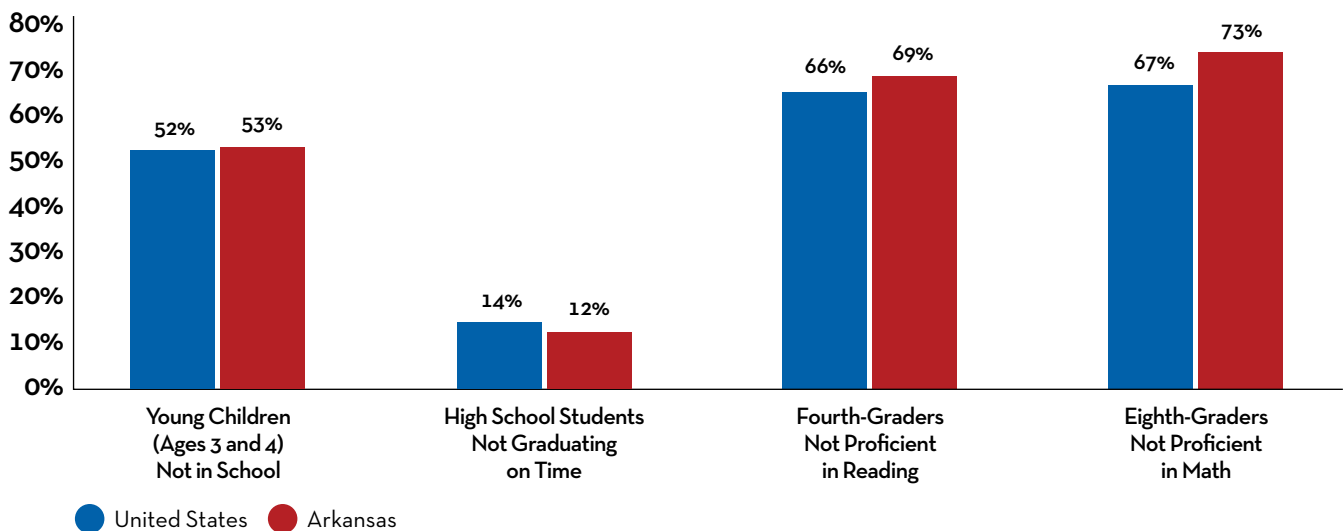
Effective and Equitable School Discipline: BIPOC children face discriminatory school discipline practices, including higher rates of expulsions and out-of-school suspensions for the same offenses as their White peers. That helps feed the school-to-prison pipeline. Arkansas also still allows the use of corporal punishment for most students. Other practices, such as restorative justice, are more effective at keeping kids in school, improving behavior, and on track to graduate.

Strong K-12 Public Schools: Despite the Lake View Supreme Court decision on educational adequacy, major gaps remain in achievement and opportunities, as do disparities in quality of school facilities and teacher pay. Recent state investments in public education have been below what many consider to be adequate, and more tax dollars are being shifted to schools that are not accountable to the public, including charter and private schools.

What to Ask Candidates

- What is your position on allowing public tax dollars to fund private schools?
- What would you do to address the learning loss impacting students because of the pandemic?
- Black students in Arkansas are far more likely to be suspended and punished more harshly for the same infractions than their peers who aren't Black. How would you address school discipline policies and practices to address this reality?
- What would you do to ensure equitable educational opportunities for low-income students, Black, Indigenous, and Other People of Color (BIPOC) students, English language learners, and students with special needs?

Arkansas Ranks 35th Overall for Child Well-being in Education



Health and Health Care

Medicaid Matters: The Medicaid program helps families gain access to medical coverage, helping them meet health care needs as they arise without the burden of financial instability. Many doctors and hospitals in Arkansas are also helped by Medicaid, as it lowers the number of uninsured patients who are seen but are unable to pay for the services. Medicaid helps ensure access to health care services in rural and underserved communities because unpaid medical bills put significant financial strain on medical providers who work in those communities.

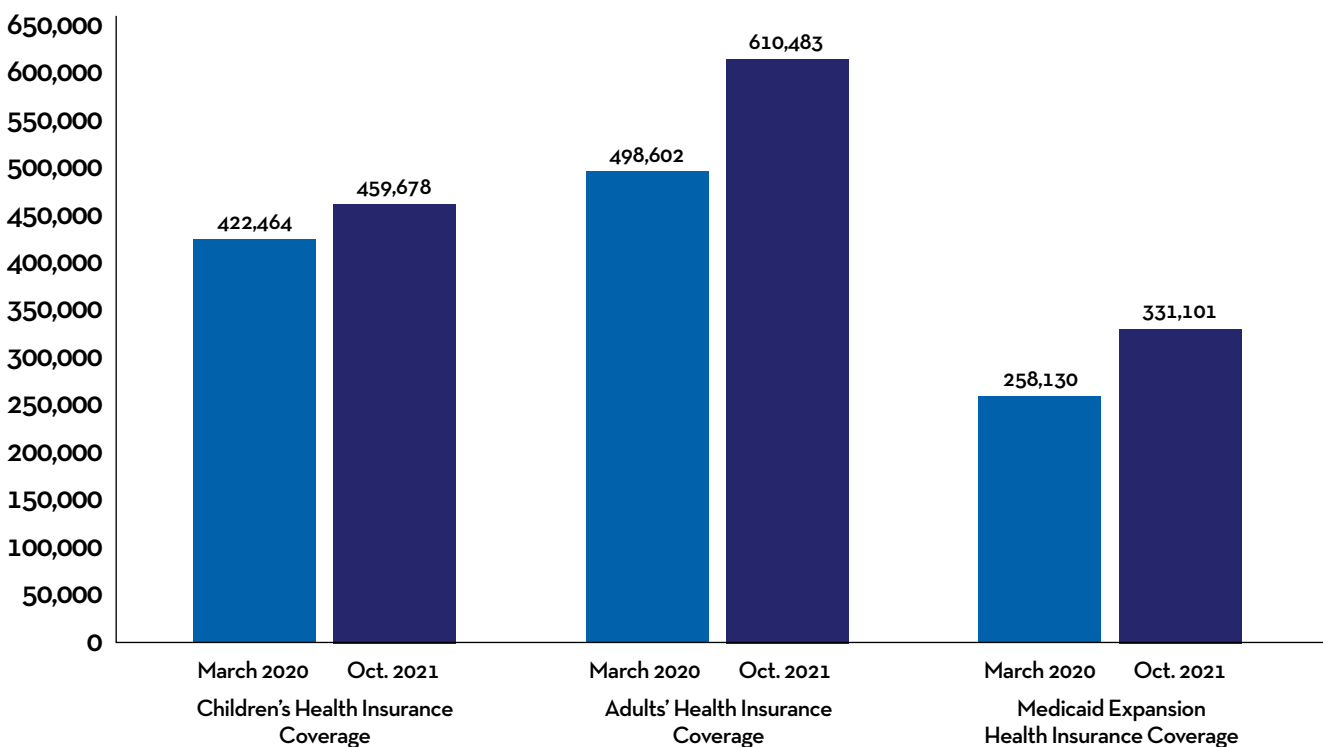
Coverage for All Children: Access to care is vital for children’s health and development. The benefits of coverage begin before birth with prenatal care and extend throughout childhood for preventive, primary and acute care. During the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency, the number of children covered by Medicaid increased by 37,000 children between March 2020 to and October 2021. Families need access to affordable coverage for their children, even when the pandemic ends.

Coverage for Adults: Adults covered by Arkansas Medicaid have increased by 111,881 since the beginning of the public health emergency. During the same time, the number of adults in the Medicaid expansion group increased by more than 72,000.

What to Ask Candidates

- With the looming end of the Public Health Emergency, how will you protect access to health care coverage for children and families’ since we already have a backlog of Medicaid applications?
- How will you ensure that all of Arkansas’s children and families have access to high quality, yet affordable, health care going forward?
- What will you do to improve the health of Arkansas’s children and families?
- How will you work to improve maternal and child health outcomes such as low birthweight babies in Arkansas?

Health Insurance Coverage in Arkansas



Source: https://humanservices.arkansas.gov/wp-content/uploads/Monthly-Enrollment-and-Expenditure-Report_Oct_2021.pdf

10 Housing

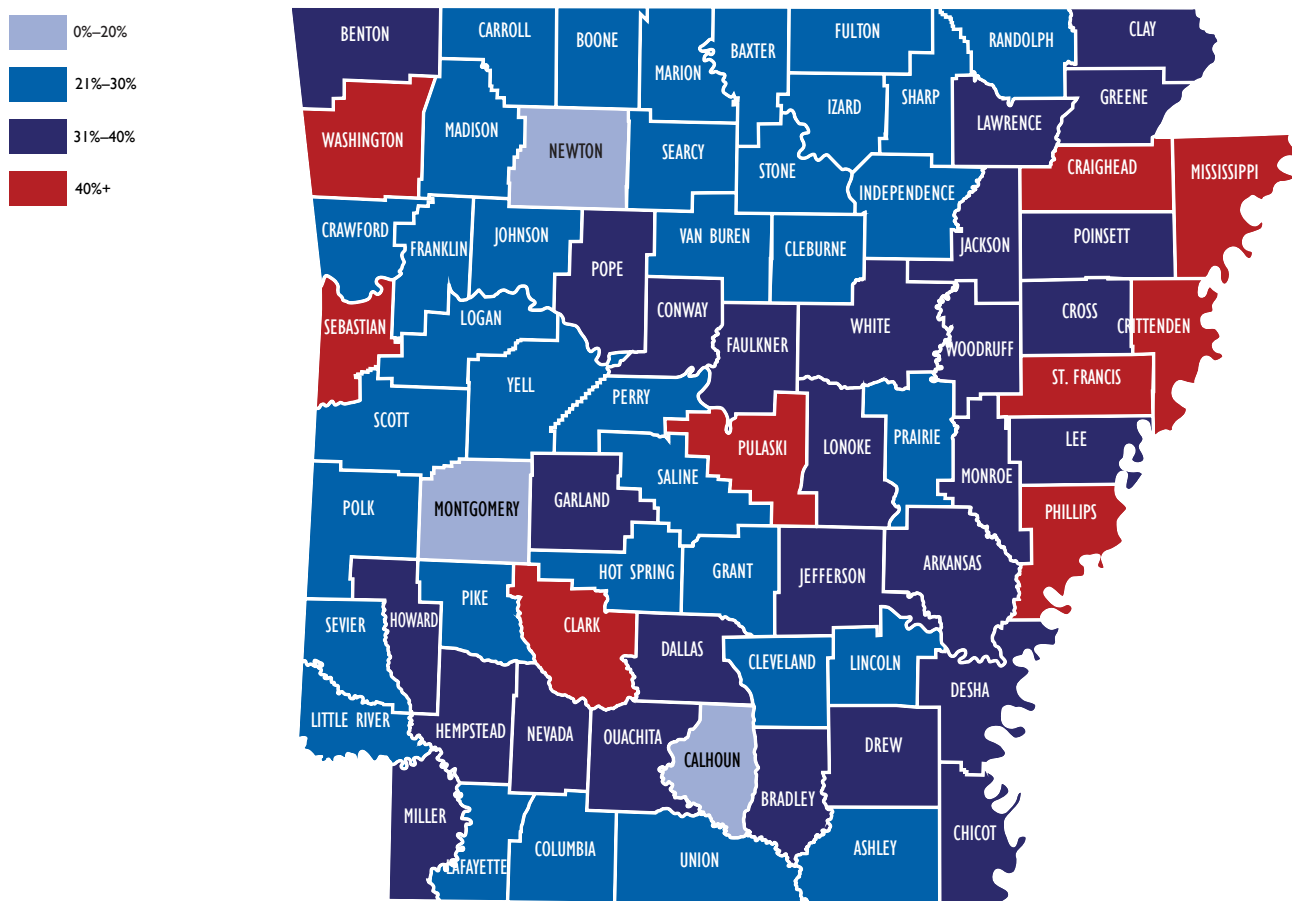
Safe Housing: Arkansas is the only state without a policy known as an “implied warranty of habitability.” Landlords in Arkansas have no legal obligation to ensure minimum standards for rental properties. That means kids in vulnerable families in Arkansas don’t have the right to basic necessities and protections in housing that many of us take for granted – things like roofs that don’t leak, doors that lock appropriately, and utilities like running water and working plumbing. Rental buildings don’t even need to be structurally sound. But kids in Arkansas can’t flourish in school and grow up to be productive adults if they are constantly struggling with issues like mold, rodents, or uncertain access to running water. An implied warranty of habitability would ensure that vulnerable Arkansas families would no longer need to accept substandard housing without legal recourse.

What to Ask Candidates

- How do you propose protecting renters and ensuring that kids don’t need to go without basic housing needs like safe shelter?



More than a Third of Arkansas Households are Renters



Hunger and Nutrition

The State of Hunger in Arkansas: Agriculture has played a large role in the history of Arkansas, but a surprisingly large number of Arkansans continue to suffer from hunger and food insecurity.

The past two years of the COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated food insecurity for Arkansans. Pre-pandemic, 11% of all Arkansas's families, or roughly 106,000 families with children suffered food insufficiency. That means that they sometimes or often did not have enough food to eat. During the height of the pandemic in the summer of 2020, that figure rose to 15% of all Arkansas's families with children. And Arkansas's Black and Hispanic/Latino families experienced hunger at disproportionately higher rates (24% and 23% respectively). Although it appears that food insufficiency has decreased overall, it is not clear how many Arkansans are still suffering from food insufficiency because the pandemic has made it difficult to track this data.

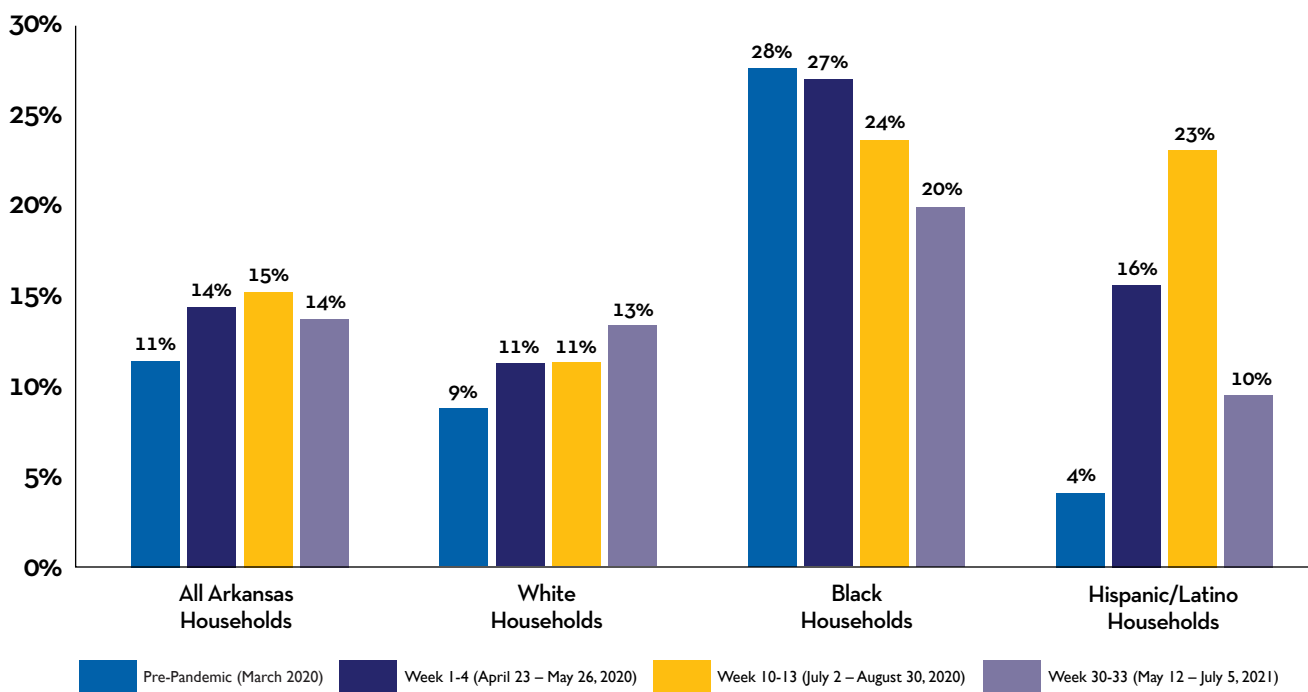
Helping Kids Eat and Be Healthy: There are a variety of programs available to lessen the burdens of hunger and food insecurity for families. The

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the nation's largest anti-hunger program. As of October 2021, nearly 160,000 households and more than 324,000 individuals in Arkansas were receiving SNAP benefits. Also, local organizations and statewide hunger agencies have worked together to meet the needs of hungry individuals more effectively, increasing the availability school breakfast, afterschool and summer feeding programs, and food distribution.

What to Ask Candidates

- With Arkansas's rich agricultural history, why do you feel so many Arkansans remain food insecure?
- How will you ensure that all children and families in Arkansas have access to nutritious food?
- What can be done to ensure that Arkansans suffering from food insufficiency have access to the nutrition benefits they are eligible for?
- What can be done to help serve the 31% of Arkansans who are eligible for SNAP but do not participate?

Arkansas Households with Children Experiencing Hunger



Source: <https://www.census.gov/data-tools/demo/hhp/#/>

12 Immigrant Children and Families

More than 78,000 children in Arkansas have at least one parent who was born abroad. That's about one in 10 children. While the overwhelming majority of Arkansas's children in immigrant families are U.S. citizens (about 83%), huge gaps in their families' economic security persist.

That's the case even though children in immigrant families are more likely to have parents who work substantial hours. [See chart] Despite that fact, about 60% of Arkansas's kids in immigrant families live in households with low incomes, about 13 percentage points higher than those who have two U.S.-born parents. Most children in immigrant families in Arkansas are Hispanic/Latino, and Hispanic* children in Arkansas have a poverty rate that's three times that of non-Hispanic White kids.

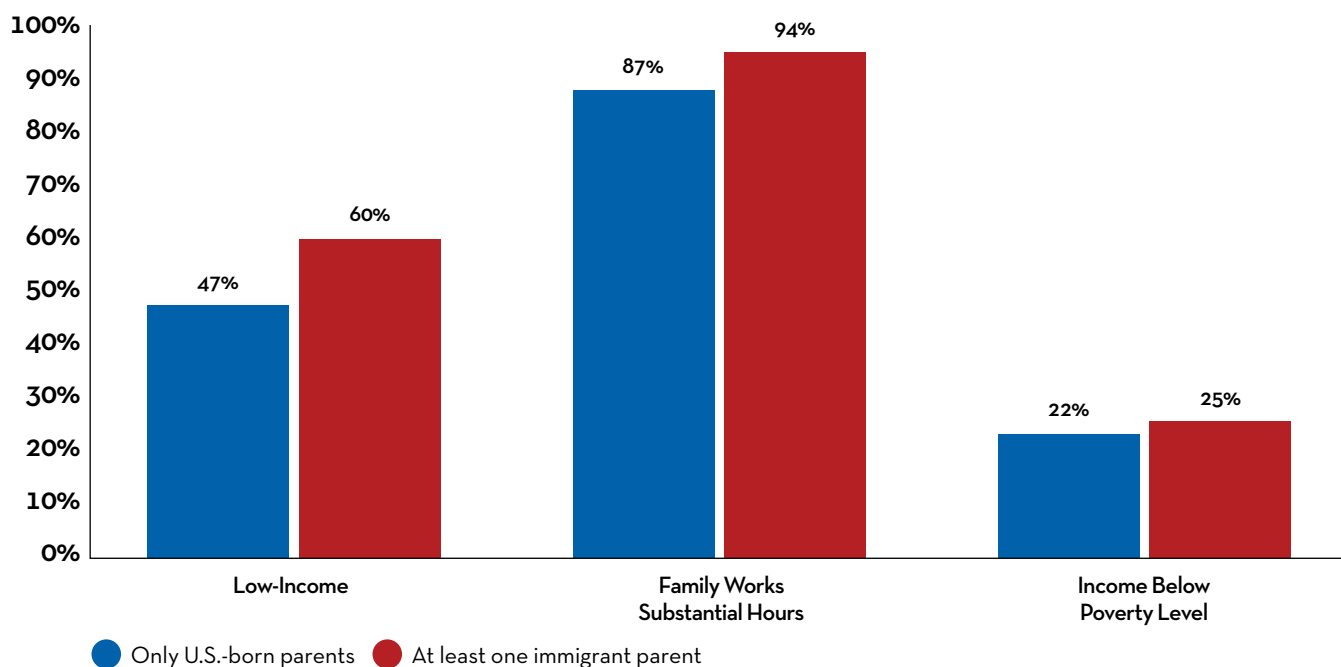
These gaps in economic security are made worse by policies that keep young people and their parents from participating fully in our economy, driving down wages for families in all ethnic and racial groups. We need all children in Arkansas to reach their full potential if we are to reach ours as a state.

What to Ask Candidates

- What are your thoughts on the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy, which protects young immigrants from deportation and allows them to work lawfully in the United States?
- Many working Arkansans, especially immigrants, are victims of “wage theft,” or the denial of wages owed an employee. What are your thoughts on legislation that would require employers to issue a paystub to workers, a policy in place in most states, but not Arkansas?
- Under federal law, adults who were born in the Republic of the Marshall Islands, who live and work lawfully in Arkansas, aren't eligible for programs like SNAP (food stamps). How can Arkansas work to address disparities in family economic security?

**Hispanic is the term used by the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, but not all children identified as Hispanic in the survey live in immigrant families.*

Work and Income Levels of Families with Children, 2018



Tax and Budget

Investing in Families: Every issue in this guide connects to taxes. We need tax revenue to make the public investments necessary to support children reaching their full potential. A good tax plan is balanced and doesn't rely too much on any one type of tax. A good tax system is also transparent. It should also be adequate, meaning that we have enough to fund the public investments that we all care about. And finally, it should be based on a family's ability to pay. The state budget is a moral document. If we truly care about the needs of our children and families, we need a budget that funds the programs they depend on.

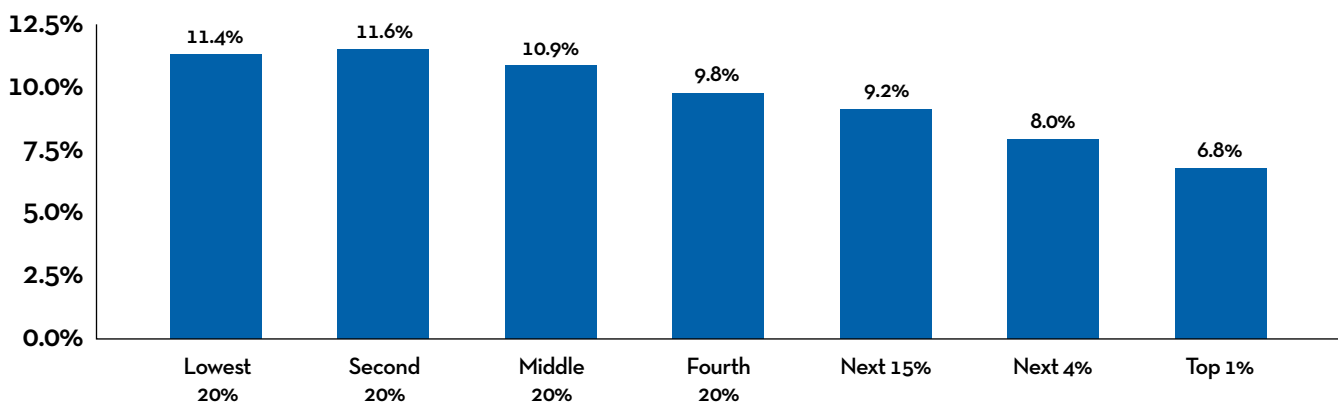


A Tax System That Works for All: Arkansas has a regressive tax system. Low-income Arkansans have long paid more as a share of their income in state and local taxes compared to the wealthy. Tax cuts to corporations and top earners have made this worse in recent years. A weak state budget threatens the well-being of kids who depend on things like an adequately funded state foster care system, summer reading programs, health care for children and families, pre-K, and a strong public education system.

What to Ask Candidates

- How much will this tax change cost (or save) a middle-income family? What about low-income and upper-income earners?
- How will you make sure that tax changes benefit regular Arkansans and not just wealthy taxpayers?
- Instead of cutting taxes to benefit a few, how could we use this money to pay for new programs that benefit many?

Lower Income Families Pay More as a Share of Their Income than Affluent Families Do



Child Welfare

The number of children in the Arkansas foster care system has grown during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the end of State Fiscal Year 2021, the number of children in foster care was 4,854. It has been difficult for children and families to receive services during the pandemic, leaving children in the foster care system longer. The state has also been shorthanded when family service workers have been out with COVID. Although the number of children in foster care has begun to decrease, with 4,657 children as of Dec. 2021, the effects of the pandemic on an already overburdened system will be felt for a long time.

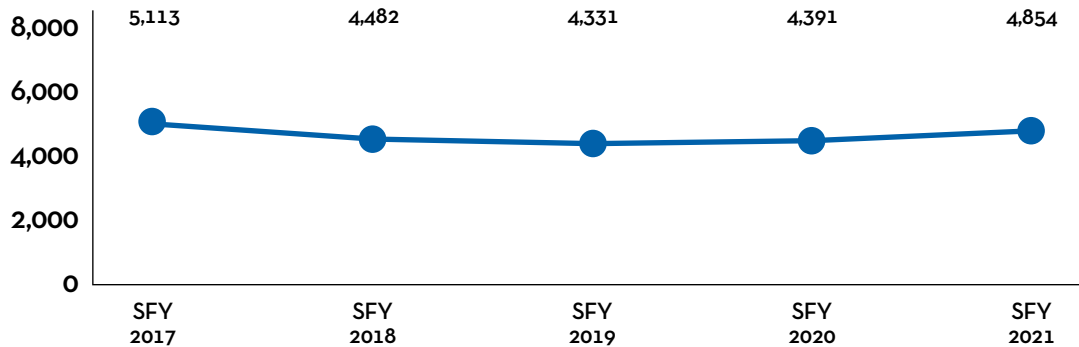
The Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018, a landmark piece of federal legislation, places an emphasis on keeping children safely with their families when possible because entering foster care can be traumatizing for many children. It also places an emphasis on placing children with relatives, so that a child can maintain a connection with their family. And if children do have to enter foster care, it encourages children to be placed in the most

family like setting such as a family foster home and discourages using group care for children by limiting funds for group care settings.

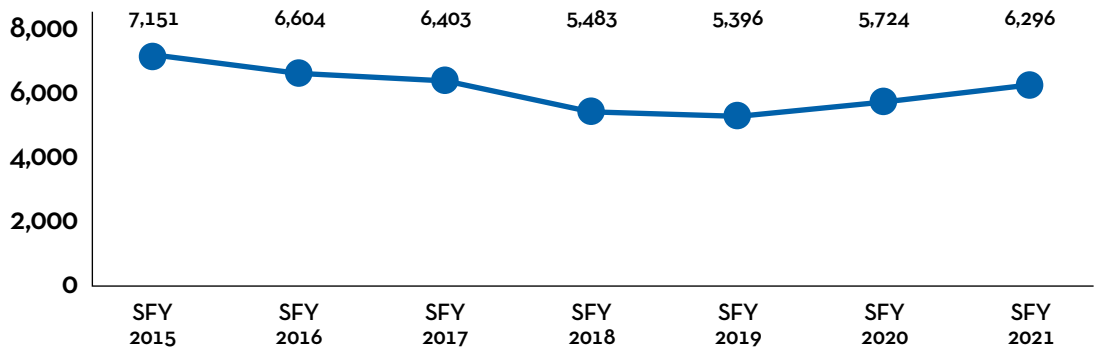
What to Ask Candidates

- What are your thoughts on the role that the state government can play in making sure that children are in safe and nurturing homes?
- How can state government help provide services so that children can remain safely in their home without entering foster care?
- For those children who do enter foster care, how can state government help them and their families receive the services they need so that they do not remain for a long period of time?

Number of Children in Foster Care at end of SFY 2021



Number of Children in in-home services* through protective services cases at end of SFY 2021



*Children remain in their home and receive services

Juvenile Justice

Juvenile Lockup v. Community-Based Alternatives:

Most Arkansas youth who enter the juvenile system are at low or moderate risk of posing physical harm to others. Holding youth in juvenile lockups, especially for extended periods of time, is bad for their well-being and endangers their physical safety and mental health. It also increases the likelihood they will reoffend and later enter the correctional system as adults.

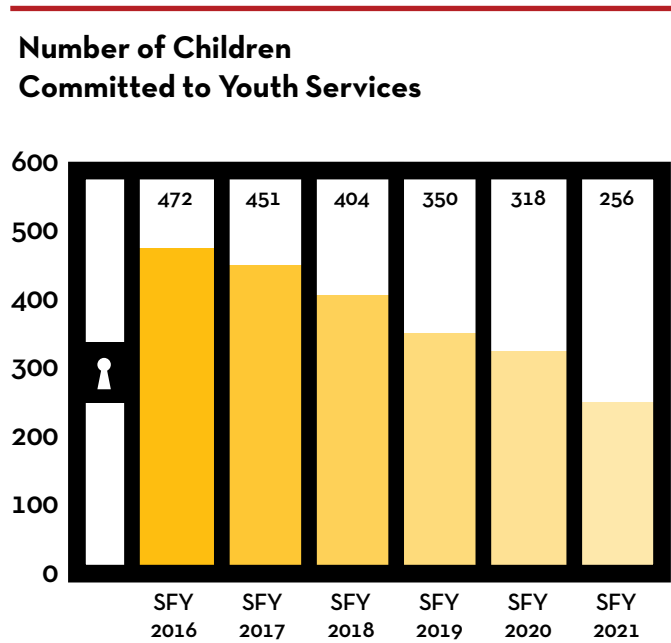
High quality, evidence-based community programs are more affordable than locking kids up, more effective in improving their long-term outcomes, and better at ensuring public safety. In 2019, Arkansas passed comprehensive juvenile justice reform, Act 189, which has the overarching goal of keeping kids out of lockups and providing them the support and services they need in their communities. The success of the reform act will depend on how it is funded and implemented.

Juvenile Court Fees and Fines: Arkansas juvenile court judges have significant authority to levy fees and fines on families with children in the juvenile justice system. Fees and fines have a disproportionate economic impact on low-income families, BIPOC families, and families from rural communities. This increases the likelihood of children from these

families being put in the juvenile justice system. And fines and fees undermine the goals of the juvenile justice system in many other ways. An emerging national trend has been to limit the use of fees and fines.

What to Ask Candidates

- How would you ensure the state prioritizes community-based alternatives instead of new jail beds for juveniles?
- How would you ensure that developmentally appropriate, evidence-based community services are available for children in every region of the state?
- How would you hold juvenile judges, providers, and DYS accountable for their decisions and actions?
- How would you monitor the implementation and impact of Act 189, the state’s major juvenile justice reform law, on Arkansas youth?
- How would you ensure that Arkansas can track the levying of juvenile court fees and fines and their impacts on children in the juvenile justice system and their families?



Source: DHS Annual Statistical Reports for SFY21 and SFY19 <https://humanservices.arkansas.gov/data-reports/statistical-reports/>

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