

## Mental health, poverty, homelessness: Westchester officials talk kids' biggest challenges

Mental health, poverty, racial inequities. The list of challenges kids in Westchester are up against is long and familiar.

Westchester County officials spoke Thursday to those challenges, the changing landscape kids face today, and some solutions that are working. The Westchester Children's Association organized the event at the Greenburgh Public Library, what it hopes will be the first of future conversations among officials who deal with kids.

"We understand that things continue to change, so what works today may not work tomorrow," Deputy County Executive Kenneth Jenkins said in opening remarks.



Thursday's event previewed data from the WCA's 2023 Westchester Children by the Numbers Data Bulletin and allowed commissioners from several departments dealing with kids to give updates on their most pressing issues.

Here are some of the highlights:

**Disconnected:** Over 1 in 10 youth between the ages of 16 and 24 are neither working nor enrolled in school.

**Unemployment:** The unemployment rate for Westchester youth ages 16-24 in 2021 was 9.5% for Black youth, 8% for white, non-Hispanic youth, and 7.9% for Hispanic youth.

**Poverty:** "We know what the problem is. The problem is poverty," said Social Services Commissioner Leonard Townes. "The poverty leads to a lack of resources when you don't have money to meet your needs and that leads to trauma." In 2021, 9.5% of the county's youth under 18 lived in poverty. For youth ages 18-24, just over 12% lived in poverty. Black and Hispanic youth had the highest rates of poverty, with 17.7% of Black kids under 18 and 19.4% of Black youth ages 18-24 experiencing poverty, and just over 15% of Hispanic kids under 18 and 15% of Hispanic youth age 16-24 in poverty.

**Homelessness:** Two different counts of homeless children in Westchester were highlighted: by the state Education Department's count, there were 2,147 homeless kids in 2022. By the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's count, there were 498. Townes said the Department of Social Services won't know families are homeless if they don't get connected to the system. In other words if families are doubling up in a home and don't seek government services, they won't get counted as homeless by DSS.

**Changing demographics:** Westchester's population under 18 shifted from 2010 to 2020: The Asian population increased 14.2% (14,387 in 2020), the Black population decreased over the same period by 12% (29,877 in 2020), the white population decreased 21.6% (91,056 in 2020), the multiracial population increased 184.4% (34,181 in 2020), and the Hispanic population increased 23% (75,359 in 2020).

## **Mental Health the 'most salient issue'**

The county partners with dozens of faith-based leaders to address mental health in their communities.

"These are the folks that people in the community will go to for support and help," said Commissioner of Community Mental Health Michael Orth. "We know some of our practices are just not resonating with many people in our community. So how can we deliver mental health services in a different way? That can involve mobile mental health services or services that are located in a community center or faith-based location."

Westchester has about 40 school-based mental health clinics. Under expanded funding from the state, that number will about double, with 80 or 90 school-based clinics, Orth said.

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Through the 63 Invest in Kids programs, Westchester is now offering free mental health and therapeutic services, said DaMia Harris-Madden, executive director of the Westchester County Youth Bureau.

"Mental health is the most salient issue amongst youth and families today," she said.

## **Justice-involved youth**

Of the 509 youth under 18 arrested in Westchester County last year, about 100 were from New York City, said Rocco Pozzi, probation commissioner.

The goal of Family Court is to keep kids in the community when possible, he said. Intensive work with children and families to divert more kids from being placed in secure facilities led to the placement of just 18 kids last year, an all time low, Pozzi said. That number includes juvenile delinquency and Persons in Need of Supervision cases.

Ninety-two percent of felony cases against kids under 18 are being referred to Family Court, Pozzi said, a sign that New York's "Raise the Age" law is working as intended. Passed by the state Legislature in 2017, Raise the Age made it so 16- and 17-year-olds would no longer be automatically criminally charged as adults.

Pozzi also said the Probation Department is often able to work with families and children to divert cases out of Family Court.

"It reduces the stigma for that family and that child of having to appear before a judge," Pozzi said.

"Raise the Age is working well."

*Contact Diana Dombrowski at [ddombrowski@gannett.com](mailto:ddombrowski@gannett.com). Follow her on Twitter at [@domdomdiana](https://twitter.com/domdomdiana).*