



November 27, 2023

The Honorable Mike Johnson
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Kay Granger
Chair, House Appropriations Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Hakeem Jeffries
Democratic Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Rosa DeLauro
Ranking Member, House Appropriations Cmte
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Speaker Johnson, Leader Jeffries, Chairwoman Granger, and Ranking Member DeLauro:

I am writing on behalf of First Focus Campaign for Children, a bipartisan children's advocacy organization dedicated to making children and families a priority in federal budget and policy decisions, to express our **opposition** to H.R. 5894, the Labor, HHS, Education and Related Agencies Appropriations bill.

Children Are In Crisis

Our nation's children are in crisis.

Across the country, children are facing immense challenges to living full and happy lives, and too many children lack the basic resources they need to thrive. Recent reports confirm what advocates have been hearing from children and families for years. Tragically, despite increased attention to children during the height of the pandemic, many reports have shown that matters are now getting worse — not better — for children as we choose not to sustain our commitment and federal investment.

For example:

- **Child and Teen Mortality**: Child and teen mortality increased by 20% between 2019 and 2021,¹ the largest increase in 50 years. These tragic figures come after a previous

¹ Woolf, S.H., Wolf, E.R., Rivara, F.P. (2023, Mar. 13). The New Crisis of Increasing All-Cause Mortality in US Children and Adolescents. *JAMA*. 329(12): 975–976. doi:10.1001/jama.2023.3517.

study found U.S. children had a 70% greater chance of dying in childhood than kids born in other wealthy countries.² We are failing our children.

- **Infant Mortality**: The U.S. infant mortality rate, which was already much higher than in other wealthy nations, increased for the first time in two decades between 2021 and 2022.³ We are failing our babies.
- **Child Hunger**: 10% of all U.S. children (7.3 million kids) did not have enough food to keep them healthy in 2022.⁴ That is a nearly 7% increase of children over the previous year. Rates of food insecurity were significantly higher for households with children that included a Black or Hispanic adult.
- **Child Poverty**: Child poverty more than doubled in 2022 compared to 2021, with the rate of children living in poverty increasing from from 5.2% to 12.4%.⁵ This increase represents more than 5 million children we allowed to backslide into poverty within a single year.
- **Children's Mental Health**: We are in the midst of a mental health crisis, with close to 20% of children aged 3-17 experiencing a mental, emotional, developmental, or behavioral disorder. Tragically, in 2021, suicide was the second most common cause of death among children aged 10-14.⁶ Firearm deaths ranked first.
- **Children's Health Coverage**: As states have restarted Medicaid and Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) redeterminations following the phase out of COVID-19 continuous coverage protections, children are falling through the cracks and losing their health care coverage. At least 10 million individuals have been disenrolled and, while data is limited, children have made up nearly 4-in-10 of Medicaid disenrollments in states reporting age breakouts.⁷ Many of these disenrollments occur as a result of administrative issues, not because the children are ineligible. In the midst of a child and infant mortality crisis, these administrative issues are causing many thousands of eligible children to lose their health care coverage.

² Thakrar, A.P., Forrest, A.D., Maltenfort, M.G., & Forrest, C.B. (2018, Jan.). *Child Mortality in the U.S. and 19 OECD Comparator Nations: A 50-Year Time-Trend Analysis*. Health Affairs: <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2017.0767>.

³ Ely D.M. & Driscoll A.K. (2023, Nov.). *Infant mortality in the United States: Provisional data from the 2022 period linked birth/infant death file*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Vital Statistics Rapid Release; no 33. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/vsrr/vsrr033.pdf>.

⁴ Rabbitt, M.P., Hales, L.J., Burke, M.P., & Coleman-Jensen, A. (2023, Oct.). *Household Food Security in the United States in 2022*. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. ERR-325. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details?pubid=107702>.

⁵ Shrider, E.A. & Creamer, J. (2023, Sep. 12). *Poverty in the United States: 2022*. U.S. Census Bureau. Current Population Reports, P60-280. <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2023/demo/p60-280.html>.

⁶ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2023, May). *Preventing Suicide*. www.cdc.gov/suicide/pdf/NCIPC-Suicide-FactSheet-508_FINAL.pdf.

⁷ Kaiser Family Foundation. (2023, Nov. 14). *Medicaid Enrollment and Unwinding Tracker*. <https://www.kff.org/report-section/medicaid-enrollment-and-unwinding-tracker-overview/#children-disenrollments>.

No child should have to experience these harsh realities. First Focus Campaign for Children urges the House of Representatives to commit to improving the lives of children by passing without delay the policy priorities and critical funding needed to advance their health and wellbeing. This work requires a “whole-child” approach, as all children’s issues are interconnected and true progress can only be made when children’s needs are addressed in their entirety.

As a nation, we have clear policy solutions to improve these outcomes. And polling shows that American voters, regardless of political affiliation, want a positive children’s agenda. A 2022 poll⁸ found that, by an overwhelming margin, voters believe the federal government is spending too little on children’s issues. These margins increase even further when asked about specific issue areas. For example, by a 64-5% margin, voters believe we are spending too little rather than too much on child hunger. By a 66-10% margin, voters believe we are spending too little rather than too much on child poverty. And by a 66-7% margin, voters believe we are spending too little rather than too much on child abuse prevention. With respect to early childhood and public education, voters believe we are spending too little rather than too much by 56-10% and 60-14% margins, respectively.

When it comes to children’s policy overall, a nationwide survey by Global Strategy Group in February 2023⁹ found that American voters have strong priorities in favor of “creating more effective childcare options for all families” (87-8%), “expanding family and medical leave” (82-12%), bringing back the improved Child Tax Credit (76-13%), and “expanding universal preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds” (73-16%).

Unfortunately, Congress is not addressing the crises facing our children or the issues of critical importance to our nation’s children. Even worse, the Labor, HHS, Education, and Related Agencies Appropriations bill before Congress, which is the vehicle that includes the vast majority of programmatic investments in our nation’s children, would impose significant and disproportionate levels of cuts to investments in our nation’s children and our future. These cuts would exacerbate the problems facing our nation’s children, and consequently, we strongly oppose the legislation.

For example:

The bill imposes more than \$60 billion in cuts, which is 29% below the FY 2023 level of funding. The legislation would disproportionately target children’s programs for reductions, including:

- **Cuts to Title I Education:** Title I, which provides funding for elementary and secondary schools in low-income neighborhoods across this country, would be cut by nearly 80%, a

⁸ First Focus on Children. (2022, Jun. 30). *Fact Sheet: Voters Strongly Support Making Investments in Our Children and Grandchildren*. <https://firstfocus.org/blog/fact-sheet-voters-support-investments-in-kids>.

⁹ Navigator. (2023, Mar. 9). *Americans are Prioritizing Safety and Quality Education While Rejecting Book Bans and Restricted Curriculums*. <https://navigatorresearch.org/americans-are-prioritizing-safety-and-quality-education-while-rejecting-book-bans-and-restricted-curriculums/>.

\$14.7 billion reduction. A full one-quarter of all non-defense discretionary cuts in the bill come from funding to the schools that serve our nation's low-income children.

- **Cuts to Early Learning**: Head Start, which provides funding to communities across the country to provide free comprehensive preschool and school readiness programs for low-income children and families, would be cut by \$750 million, resulting in a loss of services for 88,000 children and their families. The bill would also eliminate the Child Care Means Parents in School program as well as Preschool Development Grants, making child care and early learning opportunities even more scarce for families and children.
- **Elimination of Numerous Education and Preschool Development Programs**: The bill proposes eliminating funding for Language Instruction for English Learners and Immigrant Students (Title III), teacher preparation funding, family engagement centers to help support parental engagement and support in schools, and preschool enhancement programs.

The bill also makes drastic cuts to the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights, and the Full Service Community Schools program, Social and Emotional Learning (ESL) grants, Student Support and Academy Enrichment Grants that help address the young mental health crisis, and continues dramatic underfunding of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and its support for the education of students with disabilities.

- **Funding to Life-Saving Programs Would Be Eliminated or Severely Cut**: The bill eliminates funding for Healthy Start (which seeks to reduce infant mortality), the Teen Pregnancy Prevention program, Title X Family Planning, Tobacco Prevention and Control, and Firearm Prevention and Mortality Prevention Research. Moreover, the legislation cuts funding for the Maternal and Child Health (MCH) Block Grant. In the midst of rising maternal, infant, and child mortality rates in this country, we should be investing in these programs, not eliminating or cutting them.

Overall, the bill slashed \$1.6 billion out of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Furthermore, at a time of a mental health crisis and increases in substance abuse overdoses in children and youth, the bill cuts the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) by \$234 million.

- **Cuts to Youth Training Programs**: The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act youth employment and training grant program would be eliminated – a cut of nearly \$1 billion.
- **Cuts to Global Health Programs**: The bill proposes a nearly 50% cut or a \$322 million reduction from FY 2023 levels to global health programs. This funding is critically important to children across the world.

- **Cuts to the Children of Immigrants and Refugees:** The bill proposes more than a 50% cut, or \$3.3 billion, out of the Unaccompanied Children program and \$414 million in cuts to refugee programs, including Transitional and Medical Services and Refugee Support Services. Children fleeing violence and devastation in countries, including those who are alone, from around the world need more support and transitional services, not less.

In short, rather than address the best interests, needs, and concerns of children who are in crisis, the House Labor, HHS, Education, and Related Agencies bill would target children for a disproportionate share of cuts and exacerbate the problems they face.

Kids stand at a crossroads and this legislation takes children down the wrong path. We strongly urge a vote in **OPPOSITION** to H.R. 5894 and will be scoring this vote for our Legislative Scorecard.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely



Bruce Lesley
President