



November 14, 2023

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Mike Johnson
Speaker of the House
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Hakeem Jeffries
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Majority Leader Schumer, Minority Leader McConnell, Speaker Johnson, and Minority Leader Jeffries:

I am writing from First Focus Campaign for Children to urge that as the year comes to a close, you make children a priority. Congress will need to make many important policy decisions between now and the end of the year, and your leadership is essential to ensuring that these decisions represent the best interests of children. You have the opportunity to be champions for children and ensure that children are included in any end-of-year packages and budget decisions made in the coming weeks.

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. Within this overall decline of child well-being, many children of color are disproportionately suffering.

For example:

- Child and teen mortality [increased by 20% between 2019 and 2021](#), the largest increase in 50 years. These tragic figures come after a previous [study](#) found U.S. children had a 70% greater chance of dying in childhood than kids born in other wealthy countries.

- The U.S. infant mortality rate, which was already much higher than in other wealthy nations, [increased for the first time in two decades](#). Mortality rates increased significantly for American Indian and Alaska Native children.
- [10% of all U.S. children \(7.3 million kids\) did not have enough food to keep them healthy](#). 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.
- And [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%. This increase represents more than **5 million children** we allowed to backslide into poverty within a single year. Black, Hispanic, and American Indian and Alaska Native children experience poverty at a rate over twice that of white children.
- 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](#). Firearm deaths ranked first.
- 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 40% of Medicaid disenrollments in states reporting age breakouts](#). 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.

No one should have to experience these harsh realities, especially not our children. First Focus Campaign for Children urges you to commit to improving the lives of children by passing without delay the policy priorities and critical funding needed to advance their health and well-being. 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.

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 poll 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.

Survey respondents also favored legislation to make the Children's Health Insurance Program permanent by a 78-14% margin and favored extending the improved Child Tax Credit by a 72-21% margin.

Clearly, the American public is overwhelmingly bipartisan in its strong support for making much-needed investments in children. We urge you to support these effective and popular children's policies.

In this letter you will find some of the most critical policy changes and funding investments that we urge you to prioritize over the next few weeks.

While we highlight certain urgent needs of children that can and should be addressed by the end of the 1st session of the 118th Congress, this letter is not an exhaustive list of the changes that children need. For a more comprehensive set of priorities, please see our [Kids at a Crossroads](#) report; a Children's Agenda for the 118th Congress.

We thank you for your commitment to children and families. Please consider First Focus Campaign for Children a resource for the policy priorities listed below or any other child-related matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Bruce Lesley". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Bruce Lesley
President

CC: All Members of U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate

END-OF-YEAR PRIORITIES FOR CHILDREN

Federal Investments in Children

A broad range of federal programs and services work together to support our nation's children, but additional investments are widely needed to meet their unique, urgent, and growing needs. As is often the case, children from historically marginalized and disadvantaged communities, such as children of color, children in immigrant families, and children with disabilities, experience the deepest impact of lawmakers' failure to prioritize children in budget decisions. [First Focus on Children's annual Children's Budget](#) tracks over 250 programs and illustrates that children traditionally have not received anywhere close to their fair share of government funds, regardless of evidence that investing in children results in near and long-term positive outcomes for them and benefits their families and the country's overall economy. For instance, analysts estimate [\\$7 in savings for every \\$1 dollar spent on reducing childhood poverty](#). We urge Congress to prioritize children and families most in need as they consider critical spending and tax policy decisions.

Our 2023 analysis shows that the share of federal funding for children dropped from a record high of nearly 12% in FY 2021 and FY 2022 to 9.8% in FY 2023 despite efforts by our congressional champions and an overwhelming need for support. Overall, children's funding has experienced a real year-to-year decline since FY 2021, dropping nearly 20% in FY 2022 and almost 16% in FY 2023. For children ages 0-3, investments comprise a very small fraction of the federal budget — [consistently less than 2% and a mere 1.5% in FY 2023](#) — despite those years being a critical time in a child's development when investments can make a profound lifelong impact. Internationally, the U.S. historically spends just a sliver of its budget on children, only 9 cents of every dollar in FY 2023.

Now, the FY 2024 – FY 2033 budget blueprint in the House and annual spending bills aim to limit access to vital resources including food, housing, health care, child care, education, and more disinvesting in our children's healthy development and well-being. [The Congressional Budget Office](#) estimates at least a 35% cut in programs supporting children and families in FY 2033 to achieve a balanced budget if revenues are drained by extending the 2017 tax provisions for large corporations and the wealthiest filers. The national debt warrants attention, but we have an investment crisis for too many of our children and their families. **A responsible approach to reducing our deficit must center on raising revenue and not devastating programs that support and protect tens of millions of children most in need.** Those investments are proven to lift children out of poverty, prevent hardship for their families and ultimately paint a brighter future for our children, our communities, and our country.

Child Poverty

Child poverty more than doubled in 2022 (from 5.2% to 12.4%) in the U.S., resulting in millions of additional children experiencing poverty and material hardship that prevents them from thriving and reaching their full potential. According to recent estimates, child poverty costs our nation up to \$1.1 trillion annually. It doesn't have to be this way. To allow so many children to continue to live in poverty is a policy decision.

Child poverty is a solvable problem. It requires the political will to act. Amid a global pandemic, we were still able to cut child poverty nearly in half and narrow the racial poverty gap, largely due to Child Tax Credit payments and other cash transfers that gave money directly to families with children to use to meet their household's unique needs.

Congress must act without delay to pass improvements to the Child Tax Credit that once again reach children in households with the greatest need, including infants and toddlers, children of color, children in rural areas, and children who live in larger families. Many of these families are now disproportionately left out of receiving the full or even partial credit because their families make *too little* for them to be eligible for the full Child Tax Credit. Any tax package must include improvements to the Child Tax Credit to expand the number of children qualifying for the credit by prioritizing those families with children who are most in need.

In addition, the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) is a powerful anti-poverty program [reaching over 30 million eligible workers as of December 2022](#). In 2021, the EITC's temporary expansion broadened eligibility for youth who experience the foster care system or homelessness from 25-years-old to 18-years-old, and that policy improvement is estimated to benefit as many as 500,000 former foster youth. Together, the EITC and CTC lifted 3.5 million children out of poverty in 2022. Congress must build on the success of these tax policy improvements and make permanent the changes that benefit youth who experience the foster care system and homelessness.

Infant, Child, and Maternal Mortality

The United States has long held some of the worst and most racially disparate maternal mortality rates in the world, far outstripping the rates in 10 similar high-income countries, and now infant mortality rates in the United States are [rising](#) as well. **Congress should pass the 13 bills included in what is referred to as the Momnibus package. As a nation, we should do everything in our power to combat the tragedy of infant and maternal mortality, and the Momnibus would make important strides to achieving that goal.** Congress should also pass the PREEMIE Act (S. 1573/H.R. 3226), to address the issue of rising rates of preterm birth in the United States. Preterm birth is a leading factor in infant mortality rates, and it impacts [Black and Native American women](#) at rates 62% higher than white women, whose babies are twice as likely to die as white women's. We urge Congress to fully fund the Healthy Start program, which has faced threats of cuts and elimination, despite the fact that it provides vital services to communities experiencing high rates of infant and maternal mortality, preterm birth, and low birth weight.

As stated earlier, rates of child and teenage mortality are rising in the United States. Firearms are now the [leading cause of death in children](#), surpassing car accidents starting in 2020, and these rates include dramatic racial disparities. While gun violence prevention remains a contentious political issue, gun violence prevention research (including suicide), funded through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institutes of Health, has enjoyed bipartisan support in recent years. It has faced threats of elimination this year though, and we urge Congress to maintain this vital funding in FY 2024.

Health Care Coverage

Children deserve access to the health care they need to grow and thrive. Currently, 42 million children have access to quality, affordable health care coverage through Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). These programs provide access to critical health care services including preventive care, prescription drugs, and dental and vision care, all of which are essential for children's physical and emotional well-being. Unfortunately, over 4 million children are uninsured and many more are likely to lose coverage as the unwinding of COVID-19 era coverage protections continues. Other families face barriers to enrolling their children or are locked out of access to health care coverage altogether. The impact of inconsistent or a lack of access to health care coverage has no clearer signpost than the rise in infant and child mortality the nation is facing. Coverage is essential to ensuring children have access to the preventive care and treatment they need to stay healthy.

Congress must act to protect and improve upon the benefits of Medicaid and CHIP for current enrollees while also ensuring that more kids have access to health care coverage that meets their needs. Several ways that Congress can protect and/or expand access to health care coverage for children, include:

- **Making CHIP permanent**
- **Allowing states to expand their CHIP eligibility levels via a plan amendment rather than a waiver**
- **Providing for continuous eligibility until age 6 in Medicaid and CHIP**
- **Removing coverage barriers for children regardless of immigration status**
- **Streamlining eligibility processes to reduce burdens on families, including allowing tax filings to be used to flag potential eligibility for health care coverage through Medicaid, CHIP, and the Marketplace.**

Child Care and Early Learning

The American Rescue Plan Act, which provided stabilization and additional Child Care and Development Block Grant funds, saved the child care sector in our country from collapse during the COVID-19 pandemic. [Ninety-two percent](#) of surveyed child care programs that received these dollars said the grants helped keep their program open, and [one-third](#) said that without this funding, their program would have closed permanently. This funding provided real relief and allowed states and providers to do things like increase wages for teachers, reduce waiting lists, reduce copays for families, increase income eligibility limits to qualify for child care assistance, and increase the length of time families could use child care assistance for as they job-hunted.

Most of these funds expired on September 30, 2023, and we continue to urge Congress to include \$16 billion in supplemental appropriations funding to keep this sector stable in order for children to receive the high-quality care they need, families to work and attend school, providers to keep their doors open, and teachers to receive the compensation they deserve. The White House has requested \$16 billion in supplemental funding for child care, which is what First Focus Campaign for Children and other organizations have advocated for in a [memo to the White House](#) and a [letter to Congress](#). Congress must continue these important

investments to ensure that our child care system is strengthened, is accessible and affordable for families, and supports the vital work done by child care professionals and providers.

We also urge you to fully fund Head Start, Early Head Start, Preschool Development Grants, and the Child Care Access Means Parents in Schools Program, all of which have been threatened by damaging cuts this year. Now is the time to prioritize these investments, in order to provide more and beneficial early learning and care opportunities for children, families, and early learning professionals.

Nutrition

In the wake of increasing food and nutrition insecurity among children, Congress must fully fund and protect existing nutrition programs. Both the Senate and House's appropriations bills do not fully fund the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), reversing a nearly 30-year bipartisan agreement to ensure that every mother, infant, and child has access to WIC. This shortfall could force states to turn 600,000 children and mothers away from the program and slash fruit and vegetable benefits by more than half for children. [New research shows that in 2021 just 51% of eligible moms and babies participated in the program](#), underscoring the need for increased funding and outreach efforts. WIC does, however, cover the vast majority of eligible infants of color, and failing to fund the program would deepen the existing health and nutrition disparities created by decades of exclusion and policy failures for these communities. **Congress must fund WIC at the \$7.7 billion** level as requested by President Biden to protect the health and well-being of millions of moms, babies, and children.

Additionally, we urge Congress to protect and strengthen Title IV of the Farm Bill, which reauthorizes vital child nutrition programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). The Farm Bill offers an opportunity to expand eligibility for the program, which lifted 1.4 million children out of poverty in 2022. Administrative burdens and overly restrictive time limits prevent nearly 20% of eligible individuals from participating in the program, keeping food off kids' plates. Congress must reject any attempt to tighten eligibility and should use the Farm Bill as an opportunity to guarantee that America's children have enough to eat.

Behavioral Health

Prevention, early diagnosis, and treatment of behavioral health issues are critical to ensuring that a child remains healthy through childhood and grows into a healthy adulthood. **We urge Congress to reauthorize the Substance Use Disorder Prevention that Promotes Opioid Recovery and Treatment for Patients and Communities (SUPPORT) Act.** This law helps both adults and children and it includes important programs to support children's mental health. Recommendations for improvement to the original SUPPORT Act include providing a report from the Department of Labor on the 25-year implementation of mental health parity laws. Issues such as network adequacy, prior authorization, higher co-pays and ghost networks are just some of the parity issues that prevent families from finding behavioral health care for their children and adolescents.

We also urge Congress to increase funding for important programs that expand the pediatric behavioral health workforce, strengthen the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, and increase access to youth peer-to-peer support programs as part of 988.

Finally, we urge Congress to continue supporting school-based health programs that increase the capacity of schools to identify and offer services to students who need mental health services to stay in school and thrive.

Education

As students continue to recover from learning losses and inequities that were exacerbated by the pandemic, Congress must ensure adequate resources and services. **We urge Congress to support low-income students by fully funding Title I, which is vital to closing the resource and opportunity gap between low and high-income communities. Additionally, fully funding IDEA is key to ensuring that students with disabilities have access to a high-quality educational experience.** It is also important to increase investments that support educators. The Supporting Effective Instruction State Grants program helps equip educators to provide an effective education to all students, along with the Teacher Quality Partnership Program, the Teacher and School Leader Incentive Grant Program, the Supporting Effective Educator Grant Program and the Augustus F. Hawkins Centers of Excellence. We also urge Congress to continue funding ESSA Title III, which helps schools educate immigrant students and English language learners, and to increase funding to reflect the growth of these student groups. Lawmakers also must ensure funding increases, not cuts, to the Office of Civil Rights, Full Service Community Schools program, and Statewide Family Engagement Centers.

Our nation's students need fully-funded public schools and supports – not book bans and culture wars.

Children's Health Care Education and Research

We support the reauthorization of the Children's Hospitals Graduate Medical Education (CHGME) Act. Over the last 24 years, the CHGME bill has played a crucial role in our nation's 59 CHGME hospitals. These hospitals have been instrumental in educating approximately half of the nation's pediatricians and more than half of all pediatric specialists. This legislation acknowledges that children differ significantly from adults and frequently require specialized pediatric expertise to cater to their distinct and precise healthcare needs. However, First Focus Campaign for Children does not support measures that ban CHGME funds from going to children's hospitals which offer gender affirming care. All children deserve comprehensive care that meets their needs, regardless of their race, gender, ethnicity, disability, religion, medical condition, or age.

Homelessness

The high cost of rent in the U.S. — combined with the expiration of the expanded Child Tax Credit and other pandemic aid — is driving our high rate of child and youth homelessness even

higher. [More than 1 million school-age children](#) were identified as homeless in the 2020-2021 school year, and [5% of all children under 6](#) were experiencing homelessness even before the start of the pandemic. [Homelessness is even more prevalent among children of color](#) — Black, Hispanic, Native American, Native Hawaiian, and Alaskan high school students disproportionately experience homelessness compared to their white or Asian peers.

Children in households that receive housing vouchers benefit in a variety of ways. Yet current federal funding is not sufficient to assist all families with children who struggle to afford housing and [families with children are a declining share of recipients of rental assistance](#). In addition, families with children who are able to obtain vouchers too often struggle to find landlords who will accept these vouchers. **It is critical that Congress make additional investments in housing vouchers and other federal rental assistance and modify policy to prioritize families with children along with other groups in need for vouchers.** Congress must also fund landlord outreach and establish source-of-income protections that ensure families with children are able to secure housing after receiving a voucher.

The McKinney-Vento Act authorizes the Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program, which provides services for students experiencing homelessness and helps identify these students and families. In 2021, the American Rescue Plan Act allocated \$800 million to support the identification and school enrollment of children and youth experiencing homelessness. [These flexible funds allowed student liaisons to provide wraparound services](#) to students and their families, cover transportation costs for students to get to school, pay for motel rooms for families experiencing homelessness, support tutoring services, help hire additional staff and support existing staff in finding students who fell off the radar during remote learning, and more. This fund provided urgently needed support to combat the growing crisis of child and youth homelessness. It is essential that Congress allocate another round of this funding in FY 2024, in addition to increasing investments for McKinney-Vento.

International Children's Issues

We urge Congress to immediately pass a clean reauthorization of the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and to fully fund the program. The program's authorization expired on Sep 30, 2023 and the provision that directs 10% of resources to orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) has lapsed. PEPFAR currently supports 7.2 million orphans and vulnerable children and their caregivers with interventions that ensure affected children enjoy good nutrition, access to school and psychosocial support to address stigma and that their caregivers have access to savings and livelihood support. These holistic services keep children's families together and functioning and connect them to HIV treatment services if they are HIV positive (thereby also contributing to the achievement of global treatment goals). But without a Congressional directive there is no guarantee these programs will continue. The burden of HIV impacts all aspects of a child's life — their mental and physical health, their nutritional status, their educational achievements, and their risk for future HIV infection. The OVC programs have become the "gold standard" for ensuring child well-being and with 13.9 million orphans worldwide as of 2022, they are desperately needed. **We urge Congress to continue its 20 years of bipartisan support for PEPFAR by immediately passing a clean reauthorization and fully funding the program.**

We also urge Congress to **pass the Reinforcing Education Accountability in Development (READ) Act Reauthorization Act of 2023**. This legislation will reauthorize the READ Act of 2017 for an additional five years, continuing current U.S. efforts to ensure equal access to quality education for children throughout the world. The READ Act Reauthorization ensures that the U.S. government updates its global education strategy. It also requires rigorous monitoring and evaluation efforts and a yearly report to Congress and the public. We thank the Senate for their commitment to global education and recent reauthorization and encourage the House of Representatives to do the same before the end of the year to help ensure quality education for children worldwide.