



TRENTON Kids Count Community Conversations: *A Summary*

Moving the Needle Forward for
Trenton's Children



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Overview

On June 13, 2019, Advocates for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ), in partnership with the Burke Foundation and the Smith Family Foundation of New Jersey, released Trenton Kids Count, a snapshot of the well-being of children in New Jersey's capital. This databook is the first Trenton Kids Count report in nearly 20 years.

Prior to the report's publication, various non-profits and city stakeholders weighed in and provided input on the most relevant data indicators to be included, forming the Trenton Kids Count Committee. The report showed some bright spots—more infants and toddlers were being tested for lead and fewer infants were born with low birth weights. However, other areas still needed improvement. Child poverty rates have increased since 2013, more mothers are receiving late or no prenatal care, and Trenton's high school graduation rate fell below the state average at 68 percent.

Demonstrating the community's desire for current data, the report's release drew roughly 150 attendees interested in learning more about where Trenton's children stand. A robust panel moderated by Eleanor V. Horne of the Princeton Area Community Foundation Board of Trustees consisted of Superintendent of Trenton Public Schools Dr. Fredrick M. McDowell, Assemblywoman Verlina Reynolds-Jackson, Councilman Santiago Rodriguez and Kiki Jamieson, President of the Fund for New Jersey. Together, they discussed the need for career and education paths for the youth of Trenton, the upcoming 2020 Census and more.

Trenton Kids Count Committee

Since 2018, ACNJ and funders engaged a group of service providers and organizations active in the Trenton area, all dedicated to bettering the city for both children and their families. These individuals met monthly to discuss the Trenton Kids Count databook and plan the report. Committee members helped to identify noteworthy interventions already at work in order to highlight areas of progress, while also targeting issue areas. Following the release, committee members helped facilitate community conversations to put the information into action. The Trenton Kids Count Committee will continue to meet quarterly with a goal of releasing a second report. To join, contact Tara Butler of the Smith Family Foundation of New Jersey at TButler@sffnj.org.

Motivated by the event and the report, stakeholders invited community members to help improve the well-being of the city's children. From July to August 2019, ACNJ presented at six forums throughout Mercer County, known as Community Conversations. Each forum focused on different issue areas found throughout the book, such as education, health, family economic well-being and the availability of child care resources. Attendees were briefed on the material and then divided into small groups in order to discuss critical issues and propose solutions.

The sessions included:

- **July 10:** Higher Education as the Normal Next Step, held at Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School
- **July 24:** A Conversation with Colleges and Universities in Mercer County, held at The College of New Jersey
- **August 8:** The Culture of the City, held at the Trenton Housing Authority, Woodrow Wilson Homes
- **Month of August:** Conversations with Early Childhood Parents and Providers, including staff at Children's Home Society of New Jersey

Community Conversations at a Glance

The Community Conversations were focused discussions aimed at addressing issues within Trenton and brainstorming ways to improve outcomes for children. The first three Community Conversations were public sessions, while the final three were closed discussions involving early childhood service providers serving the Trenton community. In total, about 100 stakeholders attended the public conversations, and more than 30 individuals attended the private sessions. Attendees included parents, members of Trenton's City Council, non-profit organizations, foundations, Trenton Public Schools and multiple universities such as Princeton University, Thomas Edison State University, Rider University, The College of New Jersey and Mercer County Community College.

Key Themes

Though each Community Conversation was unique, ACNJ noted common themes arose in all six forums, regardless of the data being discussed. Consistently, the community voiced concerns over maternal/infant health, preschool enrollment, chronic absenteeism, career/college readiness, limited transportation availability and the prevalence of poverty, citing these as issues they felt needed to be addressed for a better future for Trenton.

Disparities in Maternal and Infant Health

Maternal health and infant health have been an area of concern for the state, where 16 percent of the total child population are under 3 years old.¹ Beginning in 2018, First Lady Tammy Murphy kicked off two campaigns—Healthy Women, Healthy Families and Nurture NJ—committed to addressing maternal health disparities of women of all races and ethnicities.^{2,3} Targeted efforts are underway within the city of Trenton at various organizations, including Central Jersey Family Health Consortium, Henry J. Austin Health Center, Children’s Home Society of New Jersey and Children’s Futures. Through these organizations, doulas and community health workers are working to provide guidance and support to mothers and parents directly.

*“As an African-American, you don’t get the same response if you go in and say I am having problems. It’s dismissed and you are sent home.”
(on receiving maternal health services)*

While these programs are critically needed, the Trenton Kids Count data point to concerning trends in prenatal care access, as well as infant and maternal mortality, especially around women and infants of color. Attendees reacted to the figures, citing the lack of a birthing hospital within the city combined with inadequate transportation. Others

explored institutional racism as being a factor. All did agree that the data show an alarming trend and voiced the need for more affordable transportation options and more pediatric and OB/GYN offices within the heart of Trenton.

Preschool Enrollment

A number of questions were raised regarding preschool, ranging from the availability of before- and after-care to whether the district was adequately advertising enrollment opportunities. Attendance issues were also raised. Several voiced concerns regarding kindergarten

*“I felt it was difficult. I didn’t feel like I was being helped. It was like, ‘This is what it is, you take it or you leave it’.”
(a parent discussing moving from another area and enrolling in Trenton schools)*

readiness and whether all eligible 3- and 4-year-olds were enrolled and taking advantage of the universal preschool program being offered. It is important to note that a handful of participants were unaware that community providers offer free public preschool in partnership with the Trenton Public Schools. Though preschool enrollment is high and has even been increasing over the past five years, participants questioned whether all eligible families were taking advantage of the program. They also focused on the quality of the

curriculum, though they were informed that preschool programs are required to meet certain criteria by the State.⁴

Chronic Absenteeism

Participants at the first two gatherings commented that in order to have the opportunity to obtain a higher education, students first must be present at school to learn the basics. Stakeholders discussed the need for more research on the daily challenges families face when getting their children to school. They also indicated a need for more

*“The school is supposed to be safe. We do have an issue with [bullying].”
(provider discussing the potential correlation between bullying and absenteeism rates).*

absenteeism-related data on different demographic groups (race, gender, disability status, etc.) in order to create targeted interventions to address the needs of those specific populations.

Data reveal that student attendance tends to decline between the eighth and ninth grade, and the group agreed that this age range required additional attention. Other suggestions included better or more transportation options,

citing that as a potential reason for absences, and greater engagement of parents in order to encourage attendance. One group also raised the problem of bullying in schools, citing that as a potential cause for high absenteeism.

Skills to be “Career and College Ready”

Ensuring that Trenton students mastered the skills necessary to thrive in either a career or college setting was a primary concern of many participants. When reviewing the data, several noted a disconnect—graduation rates seemed high relative to the percentage of students meeting or exceeding expectations on the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) exams. Participants felt that low PARCC scores were an indication that too many students were ill-prepared for life post-high school. They also noted low participation in Advanced Placement courses and SAT scores below the state average.

To combat this concern, attendees discussed a myriad of solutions, such as greater parent engagement, more apprenticeship and vocational options and more mentoring opportunities. Many attendees expressed a desire to prepare students for life beyond high school as early as possible. Some attendees noted the need to promote early literacy skills to ensure that students had a strong foundation to succeed in the later grades.

At the July 24th discussion with Mercer County colleges and universities, each of the college representatives present explained their efforts to actively seek and enroll students from Trenton, as well as the supports they offer to help them thrive, including counseling for parents of first-generation college students.

Additionally, participants brainstormed ways to better prepare and support students once they enter higher education, acknowledging that many students struggle with the transition to college both academically and personally.

Transportation

Transportation was a topic of conversation at nearly every discussion. For the first two public sessions focused on education, participants remarked that transportation was a significant barrier in getting students to school each day. Transportation was especially an issue

“It’s not always that transportation is not there. It’s how to afford the money to be able to go to where ShopRite is... and then you have to bring your three children with you.” (on the prohibitive costs of public transportation for a low-income family)

for parents with children attending different schools who juggle different school start times and risk the possibility of one child being marked absent due to a late arrival.

Beyond the impact on school attendance, child care providers remarked that parents of young children enrolled in their centers struggle with arranging transportation around their work schedules.

Transportation was also indirectly referenced when discussing barriers to receiving prenatal care. Attendees mentioned the lack of a hospital with a birthing or

maternal unit within the city limits. One attendee pointed to transportation as a factor that might be responsible for the rise in late or no prenatal care that was detailed in the Trenton Kids Count report.

Though Trenton has a transportation infrastructure (train station, busses, etc.), the city’s transportation shortfalls stem from both limited availability *and* affordability for many families. One participant noted that a routine trip to the grocery store might be a financial burden to those purchasing multiple fares for parents and children.

Impact of Poverty

While many concerns were raised throughout these discussions, all of the conversations came back to the issue of pervasive poverty. One group described it as “all-encompassing” due to its effect on a number of areas, from housing to healthcare. Participants mentioned the impact of poverty on parents in particular. Many parents endure mental and physical fatigue as a result of working multiple jobs and the stress experienced by those who struggled to afford the needs of their family.

*“Those who are employed but have two or three jobs to get the hours they need... We have more and more people falling in that [group], out of the public subsidy program into the private subsidy program, at least for a little while.”
(on parents who earn just above child care subsidy requirements)*

Because of this fatigue and stress, participants suggested that parents were often too tired or overwhelmed to attend enrichment opportunities such as courses for first-time parents or after-school workshops. Child care providers shared stories about parents who received child care subsidies but could not afford the child care differential payment (the difference between the amount the subsidy covers and the price the center charges) or those who fell behind on their copayments. These parents were caught in a difficult cycle because they struggled to afford the child care services necessary to ensure they could work on a daily basis. In some cases, these parents were not

allowed to return to the child care center or to use their child care subsidy until they were current on their payments.

Changing Demographics and Language Barriers

Many participants noted the growth in the Hispanic/Latino population. Child care providers described large demographic shifts over the last decade and cited language barriers as one of the most significant challenges to families within their centers. Many participants in

the public conversation also cited concern over the services available to English Language Learners.

Forty percent of children in Trenton are born to foreign-born mothers, raising the concern that parents from other countries may have different educational backgrounds and thus, may be unfamiliar with the city’s educational landscape.

Beyond language skills, participants spoke about the climate of fear existing within the immigrant community as

*“A feeling of safety is number one... If you don’t feel safe enough to seek these services, it doesn’t matter how many services we have, you won’t get access to it.”
(on what families need and Trenton’s immigrant community)*

a whole. Participants noted a reluctance amongst the immigrant community to engage in services or programs for fear of being identified by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and having family members detained, or being detained themselves.

The Invisibility of Trenton

A troubling common theme emerged throughout the conversations: a feeling that Trenton is overlooked, passed over by officials and the general population. While only one participant directly mentioned it, other discussions referenced it. Per one participant, the city is a “capital city in name only.” They described a city in the shadow of State offices that lacked essential resources in comparison to other large cities in New Jersey. The concept of limited resources came up frequently amongst participants, and others alluded to a sharp distinction between “the State” and the city.

Recommendations

From the conversations, ACNJ staff noted proposed strategies to address some of these recurring themes and concerns of participants. Recommendations included:

- more support to empower parents,
- better communication of services and initiatives within the community,
- more vocational and apprenticeship programs at the high school level, and
- an examination of the gaps existing in services.

Note, the Trenton Kids Count report highlights some organizations already performing such services. However, gaps still exist. The Trenton Kids Count Committee developed their own recommendations based on the data presented and feedback from the conversations.

Focus on Health — Birth and Beyond

Trenton Kids Count Committee members emphasized the need to expand doula and community health worker services to more families. The state can offer incentives for healthcare practitioners to practice in Trenton, especially those with a focus on prenatal care. Inspired by the community school model, committee members also recommended increased funding for clinics to offer in-school immunization and health checkups for students as well as their families.

Promote Education

Committee members acknowledged that educating and empowering parents was an important factor in helping children succeed. Proposed solutions included financial literacy courses for both parents as well as young children, which could lead to parents being able to support their child's educational needs in the future. Higher educational institutes may play a role in these programs, showing children that their savings can lead to a degree or career.

Education and the desire to have children be college- and career-ready was a main focus of the forum attendees and of the Committee. Middle schools can establish mentorships and offer it to all students, encouraging them in their education. Committee members also discussed having college tours earlier in a child's educational journey, exposing them to the higher education environment.

Committee members suggest a structured transitional program to address decreased attendance between eighth and ninth grade, helping students build a support system.

Securing before- and after-school care can be a problem for many working parents. The Committee recommended increasing funding for programs that care for children outside of normal school hours, allowing parents to continue working, while ensuring children are in a safe environment.

Students are not alone in needing attention. Teachers are seen as being overworked and requiring help. Suggested strategies to help combat teacher burnout were: ensuring low student to teacher ratios, incorporating more one-on-one activities and easing school access for volunteers. Additional funding can be used to hire more qualified teachers, increase pay and offer more teacher development opportunities.

Address the Lack of Transportation

Committee members proposed improving the overall transportation system—a long-term objective requiring more conversations. In the interim, legislators can reduce the mileage requirement for bussing, allowing more students to get to school safely, and institute city-wide walking school buses for those that fall outside of the bussing radius.⁵ Walking school buses consist of groups of students and one or more adults, ensuring students have a safe, reliable way to get to and from school each day.

Develop Partnerships, Advocacy and Funding

Effective collaboration is key to enact lasting change. Committee members recommended partnering with both legislators and businesses in the Trenton community to help guide the City towards progress. This can be done through financial partnerships that target specific issues, asking legislators to become involved, encouraging both businesses and non-profits to play a role in the development of Trenton, and asking those who participated in the Trenton Kids Count discussions to adopt a specific issue they feel passionate about.

Forum attendees suggest that Trenton is a place often framed in a negative light. In order to change this, Committee members recommended a marketing campaign showcasing Trenton as a place of progress. The campaign can pull data presented in the Trenton Kids Count databook to both advocate for solutions, as well as present the City's strengths. The marketing campaign can also bring visibility to the various resources in Trenton, further helping residents.

Members agreed that involving legislators is a crucial step towards progress. Involving government representatives would help address transportation barriers, racial inequities and high incarceration rates, among others.



Conclusion

Trenton is a vibrant city with residents and local leaders who are active and engaged in helping its children reach their potential. At every event, the sense of pride in their community was palpable. Community members spoke of wanting Trenton to become a better known name — not just the capital city of New Jersey. They spoke of needing resources to reduce violence in the community and support for improving educational outcomes and helping mothers and fathers through every step of parenthood. In the face of sobering statistics, community members remain optimistic for the future of their children and the city. The Trenton Kids Count Committee is motivated to assist and looks forward to seeing the changes that will take place as a result of the databook.

Endnotes:

- ¹ Advocates for Children of New Jersey. (2018). New Jersey Babies Count 2018: A Statewide Profile of Infants and Toddlers. Retrieved October 30, 2019 from http://acnj.org/downloads/2018_07_30_ACNJ_Babies_Count_Kids_count_report.pdf.
- ² New Jersey Department of Health. (2018). “NJ Agencies Awarded \$4.7 Million to Improve Black Infant, Maternal Mortality.” Retrieved October 30, 2019 from <https://nj.gov/health/news/2018/approved/20180711a.shtml>.
- ³ New Jersey Department of Human Services. (2019). “First Lady Tammy Murphy Announces Nurture NJ Campaign, Reinforces New Jersey’s Commitment to Maternal and Infant Health.” Retrieved October 30, 2019 from <https://www.state.nj.us/humanservices/news/press/2019/approved/20190123.html>.
- ⁴ New Jersey Department of Education, Division of Early Childhood Education. (2019). “Preschool Guidance and Materials.” Retrieved October 30, 2019 from <https://www.nj.gov/education/ece/guide/>.
- ⁵ Safe Routes to School Online Guide. (2015). “The Walking School Bus: Combining Safety, Fun and the Walk to School.” Retrieved October 30, 2019 from http://guide.saferoutesinfo.org/walking_school_bus/.



Other Themes and Takeaways

Though not major themes, other issues were cited by participants, including:

Mental Health

- The presence of violence in the community
- Mental health concerns as a result of violence and the effects of poverty
- Developing solutions regarding the high incarceration rate and racial disparity present in the juvenile justice system

Education

- The lack of support for special education students, as well as high classification rates
- High turnover rate of school officials at the administrative level, causing disruption
- Teacher absenteeism; stress/burnout levels of teachers
- Student literacy from Pre-K through 12th grade, with an emphasis on ensuring reading skills on track with grade level

Housing and Poverty

- A lack of stable housing and the high cost of rent

Juvenile Justice

- Incarceration rates



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