



Child and Family Wellbeing in the Antelope Valley: A Landscape Assessment of Disparities, Progress, and Opportunity

MAY 2026

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Abstract

In the desert north of Los Angeles, the Antelope Valley is home to about 120,000 children. The area has a higher proportion of children than any other region in Los Angeles County. Antelope Valley residents have historically faced social, structural, and geographic factors that lead to poorer access to quality healthcare, education, and economic opportunity relative to residents elsewhere in Los Angeles County. Several high-profile child abuse fatalities and multiple investigations into law enforcement and school practices galvanized efforts to improve child safety and family wellbeing in the Antelope Valley with the goal of keeping families safely together in the community and safely returning children home from foster care. This work involved considerable investments by Antelope Valley community members, grassroots coalitions, nonprofit service providers, philanthropists, local officials, and county leadership. Recent data indicate that consequences of the coronavirus pandemic hindered progress toward improving the wellbeing of children and families in the area. Compared to other parts of Los Angeles County, the Antelope Valley continues to experience significant disparities in child welfare system involvement, educational outcomes, healthcare access, and economic stability. This landscape assessment aims to (1) summarize key metrics associated with child safety and family wellbeing, (2) contextualize trends over the last decade, and (3) identify opportunities for increased or sustained investment to strengthen the quality and accessibility of resources for families in the Antelope Valley.

Key Takeaways

- Antelope Valley children continue to experience child welfare system involvement at higher rates compared to countywide rates. Since 2022, however, foster care entries have steadily decreased in the Antelope Valley, particularly for Black children.
- As child welfare system involvement decreases, the Antelope Valley will benefit from increased capacity among other child and family-serving agencies to support the safety of children and families in their communities.
- Health and developmental disparities in the Antelope Valley begin at birth and are exacerbated by limited access to preventive medical and mental healthcare. Efforts to improve health outcomes and access to care were hindered by the coronavirus pandemic of 2020.
- Academic milestone data suggest that Antelope Valley school districts and education professionals are not sufficiently resourced to meet the educational needs of the region's growing student body.
- Punitive actions and discriminatory treatment of Black and disabled students make it challenging for students to feel safe in school, prioritize learning, or perform academically.
- Relative to Los Angeles County, Antelope Valley families face disparate levels of poverty, and contend with barriers to local employment and quality childcare resources.

Available cross-system data expose several opportunities to improve child and family wellbeing in the Antelope Valley, which include:

- Successfully connecting families with high-quality preventive medicine and mental health assessments
- Ensuring access to paid family leave and quality childcare
- Resourcing schools and offering developmentally appropriate support
- Strengthening community-based family preservation, reunification, and aftercare services
- Examining the effectiveness of interventions within the Antelope Valley
- Tracking and monitoring progress toward ensuring child safety and family wellbeing



Acknowledgments

The authors would like to acknowledge the many researchers, public agencies, community organizations, data collaboratives, and Antelope Valley residents that contributed to and compiled the data included in this landscape report. We are especially grateful to the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health for the *Community Health Profiles: SPA 1 Antelope Valley*; Catalyst California and Children's Bureau of Southern California for the *Best Start Region 5: State of the Child* report; Measure of America and the Antelope Valley Data Walk contributors for *The Portrait of Los Angeles County 2026*; Children's Hospital Los Angeles for its *2025 Community Health Needs Assessment*; County of Los Angeles for the *Equity Explorer* platform; and the California Child Welfare Indicators Project at University of California, Berkeley for the longitudinal child welfare performance data. The authors would also like to thank the Anthony Pritzker Family Foundation for its ongoing support of the UCLA Pritzker Center's work in the Antelope Valley, and The Ralph M. Parsons Foundation for supporting the development of this brief and its dissemination.

Suggested Citation: Zucaya, I. Cruz, P., Tully, B., & Dudley, T. (May 2026). *Child and Family Wellbeing in the Antelope Valley: A Landscape Assessment of Disparities, Progress, and Opportunity*. UCLA Pritzker Center for Strengthening Children and Families.

Regional Context

Located to the north of metropolitan Los Angeles, the Antelope Valley is a geographically isolated region of Los Angeles County that includes urban cities (Palmdale and Lancaster), rural and semi-rural communities (e.g., Little Rock, Mojave, Lake Los Angeles, and others), and sparsely populated desert.¹ The region offers desert landscapes, agricultural access, and the promise of more spacious and affordable housing than can be found in metropolitan Los Angeles.

Between 2000 and 2020, the Antelope Valley experienced a 40 percent growth in its overall population.² During that time, the Antelope Valley experienced a greater increase in Black residents than any other regions of the county, many of whom relocated from Central and South Los Angeles.³ Today, the region is

home to about 430,000 people, representing roughly 5 percent of Los Angeles County residents.

The Antelope Valley has a higher proportion of children than any other region in Los Angeles County. Roughly 120,000 or over one in four residents are under the age of 18.⁴ One quarter (24.6%) of these children are under 5 years of age.⁵ More than half of Antelope Valley children are Latine (57.0%), one in four are white (20.8%), one in seven are Black (13.0%), and a small portion are Asian (3.7), Native American (2.7%), Southwest Asian/North African (0.8%), and/or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (0.6%).⁴ Compared to the county as a whole, fewer Antelope Valley residents immigrated to the United States (18.4% versus 33.3% countywide).

Community Wellness and Opportunity

Tracking the wellbeing of whole communities allows us to monitor system performance over time, assess the impact of recent policy or program interventions, and identify new or ongoing opportunities for community investments. In some cases, indices can be used to compare the wellbeing and quality of life for children and communities over time and across regions.

The Child Opportunity Index (COI) estimates neighborhood-level opportunities for children based on educational, health, and environmental indicators. Relative to other parts of Los Angeles County, post-pandemic COI scores for communities in the Antelope Valley reveal persistent disparities in the conditions of childhood.⁶ Systemic consequences of the coronavirus pandemic hindered progress toward improving the wellbeing of children and families in the region over the last decade. Even within the Antelope Valley, child opportunity scores vary, with smaller communities like Sun Village scoring lower than the metropolitan areas of Lancaster and Palmdale.

While composite indicators allow for a high-level assessment of community wellness, regional data on specific conditions faced by children and families can expose specific drivers of these disparities.

Child Protection and Welfare

In April 2014, in response to the tragic death of Gabriel Fernandez, an 8-year-old from the Antelope Valley, the Los Angeles County Blue Ribbon Commission on Child Protection conducted a sweeping review of the child



welfare system. The Commission asserted that the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) was not effectively preventing children from experiencing abuse and neglect, sufficiently responsive when child abuse or neglect occurred, or successfully equipping parents with the knowledge, resources, and skills to ensure their children’s safety after abuse or neglect. The Commission released an extensive set of recommendations for transforming the county’s prevention and intervention systems of care for children and families. Since then, the Antelope Valley has become a microcosm for systems change efforts, which have included establishing a robust, holistic social safety net, reducing institutional barriers to cross-system collaboration, and strengthening the child welfare workforce. DCFS is operated by 19 regional offices, two of which serve children and families in the Antelope Valley.

System Involvement

One key reform goal is to improve safety and risk assessments when families first encounter the child welfare system and reduce unnecessary court involvement and foster care entry. Historically, rates of Child Protection System (CPS) reporting, substantiation,

entry into foster care, and point-in-time foster care counts were higher in the Antelope Valley than for all of Los Angeles County.⁷ The Antelope Valley’s regional offices receive a higher concentration of CPS referrals that, based on historical system involvement and current current report characteristics, have a high likelihood of follow-up CPS reporting and foster care entry compared to any other region of the county.⁸ This likely contributes to the high rates of system involvement. CPS reporting and foster care entries dropped sharply during the coronavirus pandemic in the Antelope Valley and countywide but approached pre-pandemic levels during the two years that followed.

Figures 1 and 2 present post-pandemic rates of CPS reporting and investigations at the Lancaster and Palmdale offices, respectively. Figures 3 and 4 document change in foster care entries and point-in-time counts of children in care between 2021 and 2025. Los Angeles County and nationwide rates are included in each of the figures for comparison. Since 2022, rates of CPS reporting, substantiation, entry into foster care, and placements have declined steadily across the Antelope Valley, but remain high when compared to Los Angeles County as a whole.⁷

Figure 1. CPS Report Rates (Per 1,000 children)

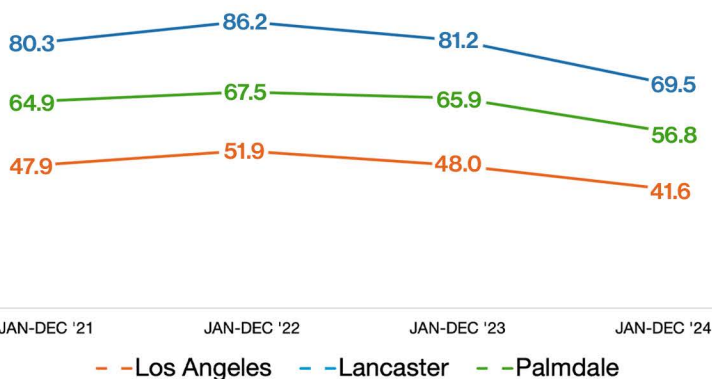


Figure 2. Substantiation Rates (Per 1,000 children)

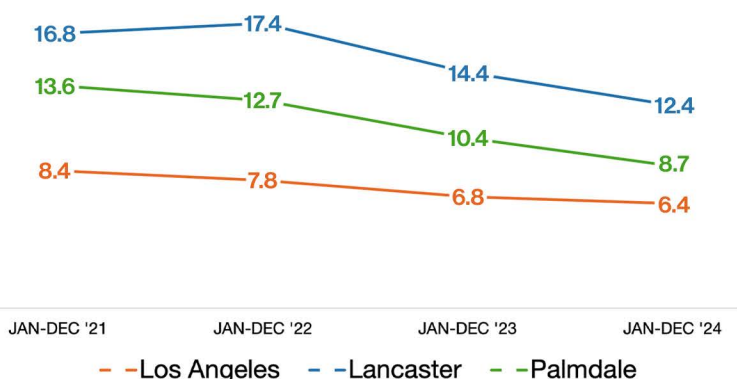


Figure 3. Entries to Foster Care (Per 1,000 children)

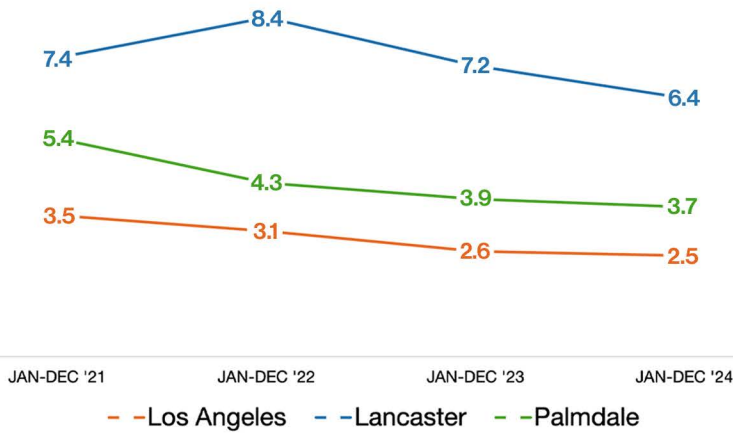
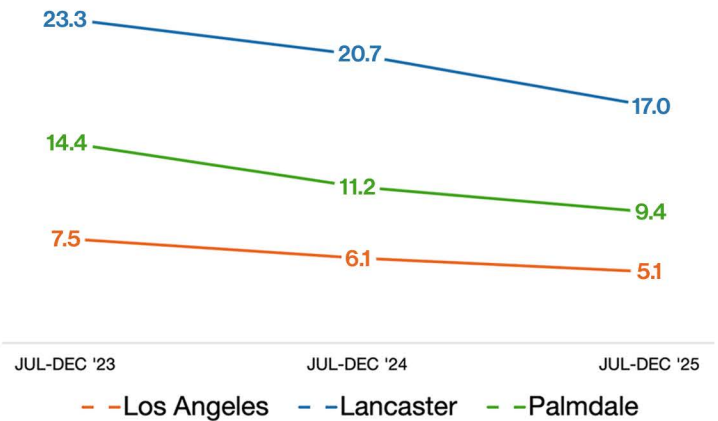


Figure 4. Point-in-Time Foster Care Rates (Per 1,000 children)



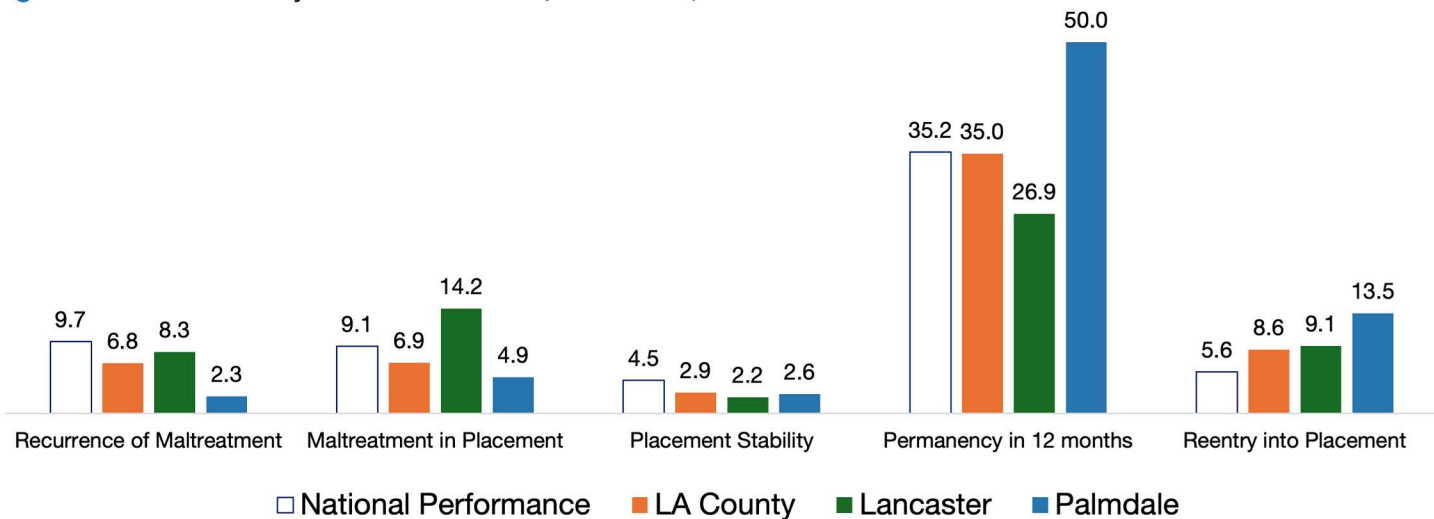
Safety, Stability, and Permanency

Measures of safety, stability, and permanency are widely used to assess how well a child welfare system is balancing the holistic needs of children and families. These measures are used to compare performance across child welfare agencies at the national, state, and local levels. These rates also allow the public to better understand performance and capacity among regional DCFS offices. Figure 5 presents 2024-2025 data on five key performance areas for the Lancaster and Palmdale regional offices, the county, and nationally.⁹ Presented measures include: (1) the percentage of children with a second substantiated maltreatment allegation within 12 months of their initial substantiation; (2) the rate of confirmed victimization per day spent in foster care; (3) rate of placement moves per 1,000 days of foster care; (4) the percentage of children exited to permanency within 12 months of entering foster care; and

(5) the percentage of children who reentered foster care within 12 months of exiting through reunification or guardianship.

In December of 2025, placement stability in the region was consistent with the county average. Comparing data from the two Antelope Valley offices, notable differences in system performance within the region emerge. The Palmdale DCFS office was outperforming Los Angeles County at keeping children safe while in care and ensuring they exited the system quickly. At the same time, children reentered foster care within one year of exiting at higher rates than were observed countywide. Compared with countywide rates and the Palmdale office, the Lancaster DCFS office saw longer permanency timelines and higher rates of maltreatment among children in foster care.

Figure 5. Child Welfare System Performance (2024-2025)



Racial Disproportionality

The overrepresentation of Black children in foster care has been a focal concern within recent system reform efforts in the Antelope Valley and throughout Los Angeles County. When stratified by the child's primary race/ethnicity, in-care rates for the region's two DCFS offices show that progress has been made to reduce disparate foster care involvement for Black children relative to white and Latine children in the region.⁷ That rate dropped steadily from 2023 to 2025 in Lancaster but plateaued after 2024 in Palmdale. Entry rate data for Native American/Indigenous children in the Antelope Valley are not publicly available at the office level, preventing an examination of disparate involvement or change over time. Countywide, in-care rates steadily declined for Native American/Indigenous children over the same period.

Takeaway: Children in the Antelope Valley continue to experience child welfare system involvement at higher rates when compared countywide rates. Since 2022, foster care entry rates have steadily decreased in the Antelope Valley, particularly for Black children. System performance varies between the Palmdale and Lancaster regional DCFS offices.

Child Wellbeing and Opportunity

Though the child welfare system is tasked with ensuring children are safe and have caregivers that can promote their wellbeing, experiences within childhood are greatly influenced by the health, educational, financial, and environmental conditions in which families live. The following sections highlight key indicators of system performance within other child and family-serving institutions and describe the socioeconomic conditions of family life in the Antelope Valley.

Healthcare

Access to quality, timely healthcare is essential to ensuring child wellbeing and minimizing detrimental effects of adverse childhood experiences. Child health insurance enrollment rates are strong in the Antelope Valley and several key indicators of childhood health for the region are on par with Los Angeles County as a whole.¹⁰ Despite this, limited access to high-quality healthcare represents a significant challenge for parents

and caregivers. Comparing Los Angeles County's eight service planning areas (SPAs), the Antelope Valley – which falls within SPA 1 – contains most of the county's medically underserved areas.¹⁰ Shortages of primary care, mental health, and dental care professionals likely affect preventive care use.¹⁰

For children in the Antelope Valley, healthcare disparities begin before birth. The average life expectancy for Antelope Valley residents is 5-7 years shorter than the county average.³ Infant mortality rates in the region have remained higher than the county average for the last decade.⁴ Low birthweight and preterm birth – which can have developmental consequences that persist throughout childhood – are more common in the Antelope Valley than the county as a whole.⁴ As recently as 2023, the Antelope Valley reported the highest frequency of developmental delay diagnoses among children across Los Angeles County.¹¹

Challenges accessing quality healthcare also contribute to adverse health outcomes in the region. Leading up to the coronavirus pandemic, nearly a third (28.8%) of people who gave birth in the Antelope Valley lacked prenatal care in the first trimester, which was more than double the rate across Los Angeles County (13.6%).⁵ In 2018, one in six (16.4%) parents and caregivers in the Antelope Valley reported having difficulty obtaining primary medical care for their children, compared with one in ten (9.3%) parents and caregivers countywide. Challenges voiced by parents and caregivers included the small number of medical facilities, shortages in the healthcare provider workforce, including a scarcity of specialist providers.

Post-pandemic data suggest that reported difficulty accessing healthcare services for children may have lessened over the last decade. By 2023, Antelope Valley findings on the accessibility of pediatric healthcare improved to match the county average.¹¹ However, children in the region continue to receive less routine healthcare, including vaccinations, than nearly all other regions in the county.¹¹ Additionally, limited access to preventive care has led to an overreliance on emergency medicine for treatments of controllable illnesses like pediatric asthma among Antelope Valley families.¹²

Mental health service availability remains a persistent challenge for families, many of whom are managing adverse social experiences, financial stressors, and systems involvement. Provider shortages can cause

long wait times for initial evaluations and make it challenging to secure treatment for children and parents when ongoing mental healthcare would be beneficial.

Takeaway: Health and developmental disparities in the Antelope Valley begin at birth and are exacerbated by limited access to preventive medical and mental healthcare. Efforts to improve health outcomes and access to care were partially hindered by the coronavirus pandemic of 2020.

Education & Child Development

School professionals share responsibility for promoting the cognitive, social, and emotional wellbeing of their students and represent the bulk of professionals who report concerns of suspected child abuse and neglect to the child welfare system. Unfortunately, families in the Antelope Valley experience challenges accessing and navigating the education system for their children throughout childhood and adolescence.

High quality early childhood education programs can help families address developmental delays and support children's transition into primary school settings. Preschool enrollment for children ages 3–4 is notably lower in the Antelope Valley (34.0%) than in Los Angeles County overall (48.8%),¹¹ revealing a missed opportunity for children that may benefit from early education programming. School performance metrics demonstrate that children in the Antelope Valley experience disparate

access to high quality schools relative to other regions of the county.³ Post-pandemic data show that by the third grade, fewer than one-third (27.5%) of students in the Antelope Valley met or exceeded California standards for Language Arts and Literacy (versus 49.6% countywide) and achievement in mathematics was lower than any other region of the county.¹⁸

Takeaway: Academic milestone data suggest that Antelope Valley school districts and education professionals are not sufficiently resourced to meet the educational needs of the region's growing student body.

Secondary and higher education metrics are also significantly lower in the Antelope Valley than the county.³ In 2022, the annual suspension rate in the region was nearly triple the countywide rate (4.7% versus 1.7%).¹¹ That same year, a smaller percentage of Antelope Valley students graduated high school compared with students countywide (67.2% versus 86.1%).¹¹ Only one in five (18.0%) Antelope Valley residents go on to earn a bachelor's degree or higher by the age of 25, compared to one in three (34.6%) Los Angeles County residents.¹¹ To better understand educational outcomes in the Antelope Valley, we must examine barriers to school engagement and learning.

In 2021, the County's Office of the Inspector General substantiated allegations that Lancaster station-based Sherriff's deputies disproportionately policed Black high



school students through discretionary stops, back-seat detentions, searches, and pointing firearms at them for non-violent offenses.¹⁴ Additionally, a 2023 study by Disability Rights California documented learning loss and found pervasive disability and racial discrimination throughout the Antelope Valley Union High School District (AVUHSD) towards students with disabilities, particularly for Black students with disabilities.¹⁵

During the 2021-2022 school year, high rates of suspension led to considerable loss of instruction time, with Black students enduring half of that loss.¹⁵ AVUHSD expelled and suspended Black students and students with disabilities at significantly higher rates than their peers, identified Black students as having an Emotional Disturbance at more than three times the rate of their peers, and segregated students with disabilities from nondisabled students at significantly higher rates than the national average.¹⁵

Following marginalization within academic settings, youth may choose or feel forced to disconnect from educational institutions and vocational training. In the city of Lancaster, nearly one in four (24.3%) transition age youth between the ages of 16 and 24 years are neither in school nor working, which is more than double the countywide rate.¹⁶

Takeaway: Punitive actions and discriminatory treatment of Black and disabled students make it challenging for students to feel safe in school, prioritize learning, or perform academically.

Financial Stability and Opportunity

Financial hardship remains a pervasive and increasing challenge for families in the Antelope Valley and has sweeping impacts on child wellbeing and development. Compared with Los Angeles County, families in the region spend a comparable share of income on housing but have less money remaining for childcare, transportation, basic needs, and other expenses.

A lack of local, well-paying employment opportunities leads many Antelope Valley residents to work far from home or exit the workforce entirely.³ By 2023, Antelope Valley had the lowest employment rate (55.5%) in the county.¹¹ Car ownership is less common and commute times are considerably longer among Antelope Valley

Antelope Valley residents than in the metropolitan Los Angeles area.¹⁷ Limited transportation access and the remoteness that characterizes much of the region contribute to the financial precarity of families and likely make it harder to access healthcare, schools, and other child-serving resources.

Barriers to quality, accessible childcare exacerbate employment challenges among parents and caregivers in the region. In 2023, nearly half (45.0%) of families surveyed reported challenges finding care (versus 38.5% countywide), which increased from 41.0% in 2018.¹⁸ Some parents may prefer to be the primary caretaker of their children and choose to exit the workforce despite the increasing cost of living. For parents seeking childcare, however, not having access to quality providers may compromise their ability to ensure children are safely supervised and still have their basic needs met.

Roughly four out of five (83.0%) families with children under the age of six earn less than the real cost of living (versus 61.2% countywide).⁵ As a result, over half (54.9%) of children in the region live below 200% of the Federal Poverty Line, which is more than 10 percentage points higher than the county average.¹⁸ Before and after the pandemic, the Antelope Valley saw higher rates of food insecurity among families than any other region in the county.⁵ Despite the expansive geography of the region, rent burden, housing insecurity, and unsheltered homelessness were on the rise as recently as 2024.¹¹

Takeaway: Relative to Los Angeles County, Antelope Valley children face disparate levels of poverty, which is exacerbated by barriers to local employment and quality childcare resources.

Discrimination

Experiences of discrimination, which may include disparate surveillance and inequitable responses by institutions that touch the lives of children and families, can lead to and exacerbate the impact of adverse childhood experiences on health outcomes and other wellbeing indicators.¹⁹ These consequences can have intergenerational effects. Available data show that discriminatory experiences are more commonly reported by and observed among families in the Antelope Valley, relative to residents of Los Angeles

County as a whole.²⁰ On top of that, Black families represent a growing portion of the region's population and experience structural and interpersonal racism at higher rates within the region and across the county.²¹

Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, discriminatory treatment in healthcare settings was more frequently reported in the Antelope Valley compared with countywide findings (6.7% versus 3.8%).⁵ Higher rates of hate crimes targeting racial and ethnic groups have been reported in the Antelope Valley compared with the county average.⁵ This may be exacerbated by disparate treatment of non-white Antelope Valley residents by law enforcement. In 2015, the federal Department of Justice determined that the Sherriff's deputies in the Antelope

Valley disproportionately stopped, searched, and used unreasonable force on Black and Latine residents, compared to other groups. A follow-up investigation in 2023 found that the Los Angeles Sherriff's Department had not fully implemented policy, practice, and oversight reforms necessary to address inequitable policing.¹⁴

Takeaway: Law enforcement citations and detentions can have lasting consequences on a person's access to safe housing, employment, and academic institutions, which can profoundly impact parent and child wellbeing.

Implications

Over the last decade, considerable efforts have been made by community coalitions, service providers, social service agencies, and elected officials to close the health, safety, educational, and equity gaps facing families in the Antelope Valley. Many of these efforts were made possible by community-driven advocacy, innovative cross-system collaboration, and public-private partnership. County leadership has prioritized expanding the region's health and human services workforce, professional development of childcare providers and educators, and increasing local employment opportunities for young adults from the Antelope Valley.²²

Based on nearly a decade of cross-sector performance and outcome data, progress toward ensuring child safety and promoting child and family wellbeing is evident. At the same time, continued effort and investment are more necessary than ever to close the gap on persistent disparities and prevent fallout from recent federal policy changes and impending budget cuts to the social safety net across the state, county, and Antelope Valley.

Opportunities to improve child and family wellbeing in the Antelope Valley include:

- Successfully connecting families with high-quality preventive medicine and mental health assessments
- Ensuring access to paid family leave and quality childcare
- Resourcing schools and offering developmentally appropriate support
- Strengthening existing community-based family preservation, reunification, and aftercare services
- Examining the effectiveness of interventions within the Antelope Valley
- Tracking and monitoring progress toward ensuring child safety and family wellbeing

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