



Michigan Kids Deserve Housing, Environmental and Education Justice

Julie Cassidy, Senior Policy Analyst | March 2023

Every child deserves a quality education and the opportunity that comes with it. Compared to other states, however, Michigan does not ensure that kids—especially those in families with low incomes—grow up under conditions that support their success.

Housing in particular is critical to children’s achievement, but families with Housing Choice Vouchers (HCVs) and other non-wage sources of income often have a hard time finding landlords who will rent to them. Several Michigan communities protect renters from this type of discrimination. A similar state-level law would give all families with vouchers more options for safe housing in healthy, opportunity-rich neighborhoods. The resulting education benefits would promote bright futures for kids, a strong workforce and economic prosperity for the whole state.

Access to healthy, affordable housing will help improve education outcomes in Michigan

Michigan is ranked

40th

in the nation for education

68%

of 4th graders are not proficient in *reading*.

69%

of 8th graders are not proficient in *math*.

SOURCE: Annie E. Casey Foundation
2022 KIDS COUNT Data Book

Housing Choice Vouchers can improve outcomes for kids and families, but many voucher holders face discrimination

Housing affordable to struggling families is often located in high-poverty neighborhoods with older, substandard housing and exposure to pollution. This leads to serious health conditions and disabilities, such as lead poisoning and asthma, that hinder school attendance and expose kids to discrimination for the rest of their lives. Due to historic and ongoing racial discrimination in housing, such as racial covenants, redlining, and predatory lending practices, children of color bear the brunt of this environmental health burden.

Through the HCV program, income-eligible families receive a voucher to help them afford a private rental unit. Generally, the tenant’s portion of the rent is set at 30% of their income and the voucher covers the rest, up to a cap based on local fair market rents. Many landlords, however, will not accept HCVs as payment or include them in calculating whether a prospective tenant’s income is high enough to qualify for a lease.

Voucher rejection rates are highest in low-poverty neighborhoods,¹ where policy and budget decisions have resulted in higher-performing schools and fewer environmental health threats.



64,122 HCVs help households in every Michigan county

afford a safe place to live.

Michigan landlords earn over **\$647,000,000** annually from HCV households.

41% of Michigan families that use HCVs have **children**.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
Picture of Subsidized Households (2021 State Data)

While housing vouchers are an important support for Michigan families, landlords, and local economies, they're not as effective as they could be. A longstanding funding shortage means that most income-qualifying families never receive a voucher, and in Michigan, the few that do spend an average of 26 months on the waiting list first.² Generally, a family loses their HCV if they don't find a place to use it within four months, and numerous barriers—including rejection by landlords who own affordable units—make it hard to find a home within that time frame.

Regardless of landlords' motivations for refusing vouchers, source-of-income discrimination effectively perpetuates racial discrimination which is otherwise illegal. White landlords are less likely than Black and Hispanic landlords to accept vouchers,³ and due to a long history of economic and housing discrimination, families that use HCVs are disproportionately Black.

Systemic discrimination also means that, across Michigan, environmental threats such as hazardous waste facilities and roads with heavy traffic are concentrated in census tracts with high levels of poverty and racial segregation.⁴ This contributes to higher disability rates—which affect academic outcomes—among Black, Indigenous, and other people of color.

Layers of discrimination punish children exposed to environmental toxins

Asthma problems, which can be set off by outdoor air pollution and triggers in the home such as mold, are one of the top causes of school absenteeism,⁵ contributing to lower grades and worse performance on student assessments.⁶ With the nation's sixth highest rate of children with asthma problems⁷ and alarming racial disparities in childhood asthma, Michigan can't afford to ignore the importance of housing quality and location in education outcomes.

Kids in families that receive an eviction filing miss school more often and are at a higher risk for lead poisoning because they tend to live in neighborhoods with older, deteriorating housing.⁸ In some cases, lead hazards directly cause homelessness by displacing already vulnerable families.^{9,10} This has serious implications for children during their school years and beyond: only 55% of Michigan homeless students graduate from high school on time, and 1 in 5 drops out—the highest dropout rate of any demographic group in the state.¹¹

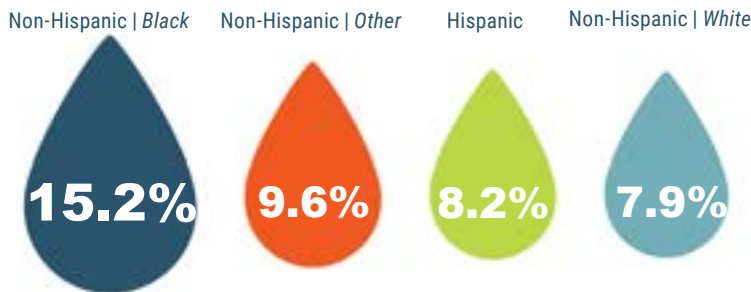
Housing vouchers can help families avoid catastrophic evictions and put down roots for their children in healthier, safer homes and neighborhoods—but only if landlords will accept them.

Exposure to toxins like lead is especially harmful during childhood. Kids experiencing the resulting physical, mental and cognitive health disabilities face discrimination that affects them for the rest of their lives. Education underfunding, healthcare barriers, and bias in the criminal legal system and the workplace lead to high poverty rates for people with disabilities.¹²

Historically, Michigan’s school funding formula has shortchanged children with disabilities by about \$742 million a year, leaving local school districts to fill the gap with general education dollars.¹³ For the 2023 budget year (which began October 1, 2022), the state did adopt a new weighted funding formula that more accurately reflects the costs of educating disabled students,¹⁴ but does not close the gap completely.

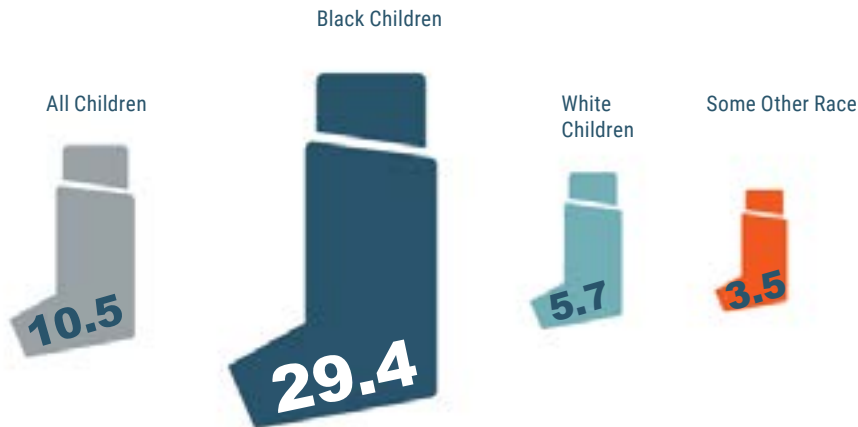
Black and brown children are more likely to experience health concerns like lead poisoning, asthma

Percentage of U.S. children with a blood lead level of at least 2 micrograms per deciliter, by race and ethnicity



SOURCE: Child Trends (February 2, 2018)

Asthma hospitalizations among Michigan children Age 0-17, by Race (Rate per 10,000)



SOURCE: Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, Asthma by Race and Ethnicity (February 2020)

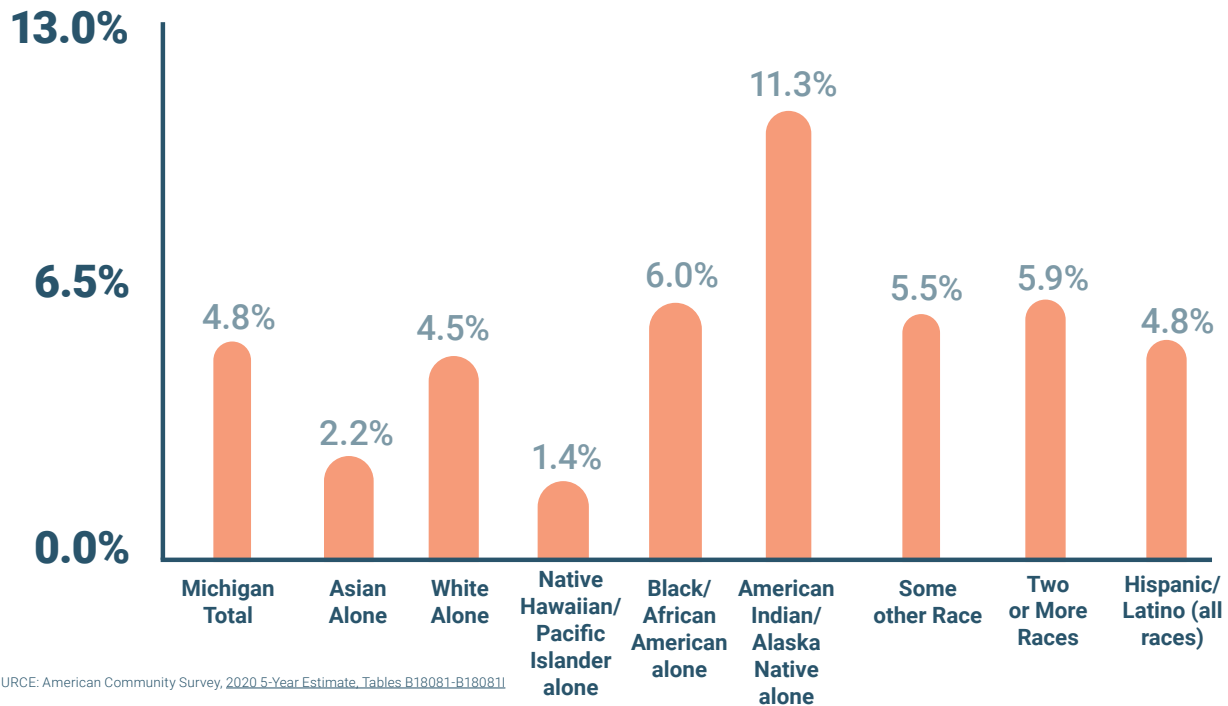


An Important Note About Data: Data disaggregation by race and ethnicity is critical to identifying pressing social concerns and developing effective, equitable policy solutions. Many data sources, however, omit certain races and ethnicities or collapse them into an “Other” category. This renders these groups invisible and masks notable economic, social and health disparities both between and within them. This affects American Indians/Alaska Natives, Asians, Pacific Islanders and Native Hawaiians in particular.

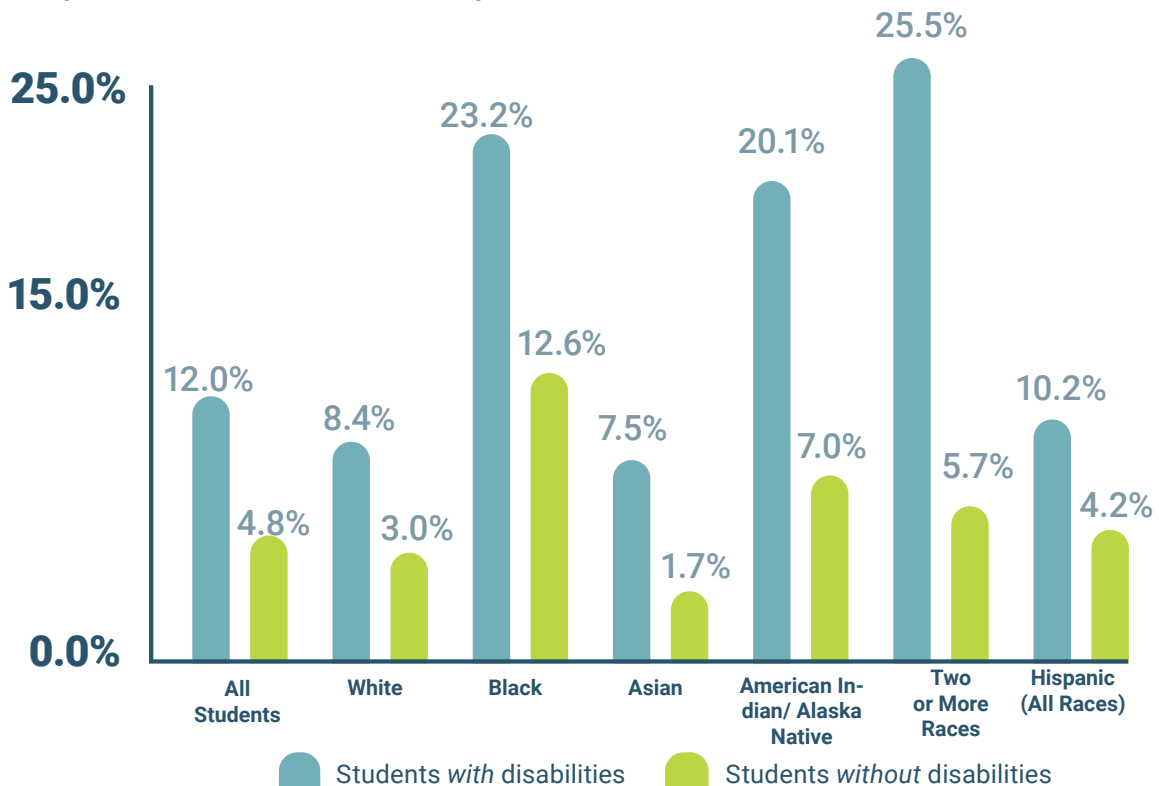
Throughout this report and as standard practice, the League includes disaggregated data whenever it is available, and we continue to advocate for disaggregation to the greatest extent possible by data collection and research entities.

Kids with disabilities are disproportionately disciplined in schools, which compounds racial disparities

Disability Rates for Michigan Children Age 0-17, by Race and Ethnicity



Percentage of U.S. K-12 Students Subject to Out-of-School Suspension, by Disability Status, Race and Ethnicity



SOURCE: U.S. Government Accountability Office, *K-12 Education: Discipline Disparities for Black Students, Boys, and Students with Disabilities* (March 2018), pp. 13-14.

Schools also discipline disabled kids more frequently than those without disabilities, compounding existing racial disparities in discipline practices and playing a disturbing role in the school-to-prison pipeline.¹⁵

The racialized criminalization of disability continues outside of school. People with “invisible” disabilities such as intellectual, developmental or mental health disabilities—all of which can result from lead poisoning—are especially at risk for police violence¹⁶ and incarceration.¹⁷


Expanding Housing Voucher Impact for a Better Future

Neighborhood conditions connected to segregation can both increase the risk of lead exposure and compound its impact. Lead-poisoned Black children who live in highly segregated Black neighborhoods have even lower fourth-grade reading scores than their counterparts who live in neighborhoods with higher proportions of White households.¹⁸

Lead poisoning’s ripple effect into adulthood is substantial: lead exposure is expected to reduce lifetime earnings by a collective \$171 million among Michigan children born in 2012.¹⁹ Housing vouchers correlate with lower levels of lead poisoning prevalence and severity for children in families with low incomes,²⁰ but this protective effect is limited if landlords with higher-quality units won’t accept this form of payment.


Source-of-income protections would promote a more equitable dispersal of rental housing options across communities and empower even more families to use their vouchers in healthier neighborhoods and safer homes that support their children’s success. Housing Choice Vouchers have the greatest impact when families can use them while their children are still young.

Compared to peers who remain in public housing, a child whose family uses a voucher to move to a well-resourced neighborhood before the child reaches adolescence experiences...

AN INCREASED COLLEGE ATTENDANCE RATE 

A \$302,000 INCREASE IN TOTAL LIFETIME EARNINGS

AN \$11,200 INCREASE IN TOTAL LIFETIME TAXES PAID

INCREASED ECONOMIC SECURITY AMONG SUBSEQUENT GENERATIONS 

SOURCE: Chetty, Raj; Hendren, Nathaniel; & Katz, Lawrence F. (August 2015). *The Effects of Exposure to Better Neighborhoods on Children: New Evidence from the Moving to Opportunity Experiment*.



Housing vouchers offer enormous promise for children in struggling families to stay healthy, do their best in school and achieve their full potential, but only if their families can actually use them. Source-of-income protections are increasingly important because the HCV program is the nation's largest rental assistance program and the federal government continues to outsource provision of assisted housing to private landlords. The U.S. loses more than 10,000 government-owned and -operated public housing units every year.²¹ Many of them are not replaced by the private sector, leaving struggling families with even fewer options that are both affordable and safe. Statewide source-of-income protections would both increase the number of affordable homes available, and ensure that they were more equitably distributed across communities. This would further environmental justice, improve opportunities for Michigan children and better position our state to thrive.

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