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CHILDREN'S BUDGETS

Aligning Public Dollars with Children's Needs

Child-Centered Governance Research-to-Policy Brief Series



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Public budgets have the power to drive lasting change for children. Intentionally integrating the needs of children and youth in government budgets helps direct public resources to better support their well-being. Children's budgets enable governments to understand how resources are allocated for children and youth within the broader budget , communicate those investments transparently, and use that insight to better align investments with needs. This policy brief highlights key considerations for local and state government leaders working to embed children's priorities into budget decisions.

CHILDREN'S BUDGETS AT A GLANCE

Children represent a significant share of the population. They are future economic contributors and investments in children have been shown to generate substantial financial returns.[1] Despite this, investment in child-focused programs in the U.S. remains inconsistent, partly due to a lack of a standardized, coordinated approach to budgeting for children, making it difficult to allocate resources to actual needs.[2]

Children's budgets help local and state governments develop a comprehensive understanding of how public dollars are invested in children and youth and provide visibility into child-related allocations within the broader government budget. They help governments understand and track how public dollars are invested in children across systems and funding sources, identify gaps, assess what investments are most effective, and align investments with children's needs and well-being. Using evidence-based analysis and transparent reporting, this approach helps guide investments where they are needed most and provides a tool to support informed planning, resource allocation and oversight and strengthen equitable investment in children over time.

IMPACTS AND OUTCOMES

Research suggests that using children's budgets can strengthen transparency and accountability in how funding is used to support child well-being and serve as a tool for delivering long-term social and economic benefits for children and families. When applied at the local level, these practices help ensure investments are better targeted, more equitable and more effective.

- Investing in Children Yields Economic Returns: Investments in children often yield high financial returns. Examples include early childhood education (up to $13 on every dollar invested in the U.S. [1]), food assistance for children ($62 on every dollar invested in the U.S. [3]) and programs on exposure to lead paint ($14 return on every dollar invested in the U.S.[4]). These findings underscore the importance of understanding how resources are invested in children and youth.
- More Effective Resource Allocation: Tracking child-related expenditures enables governments to allocate resources more strategically, improving outcomes without necessarily increasing budgets.[5] Even without increasing overall budgets, more strategic allocation of existing funds can lead to better outcomes.[6]

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- Improved Transparency and Accountability: Children's budgets increase transparency in how resources are allocated for children, strengthening accountability, and improving budget quality, and supporting stronger governance and development outcomes.[7]
- Reduces Socioeconomic Gaps: Targeted investments in communities with greater needs can narrow socioeconomic gaps, supporting long-term education, employment and civic engagement outcomes for children.[4]

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Children's budgets work best when governments demonstrate visible commitment, build capacity and engage partners and communities in the process.[8,14,20] Strengthening the use of quality data, collaborating with civil society to understand needs, investing in evidence-based interventions and programming, and taking thoughtful approaches to including community perspectives can enhance impact. Together, these elements help local leaders embed priorities focused on child well-being throughout the budget cycle, improve accountability and foster more equitable, resilient communities. [17, 20]

Political Buy-in: Policymakers who prioritize children's issues can link children's budgets to broader goals like economic growth or community well-being and demonstrate early wins through pilot projects or local data. Public and civil society backing can also help maintain momentum and show demand for sustained investment in children.[10,12,14,18,20 21]

Institutional Capacity: Experience shows that children's budgets work best when governments have trained staff and a dedicated focal point to coordinate efforts. Governments can start by providing basic training for budget officers or designating a coordinator.[15,16] Partnering with civil society and academic institutions to co-design and monitor children's budgeting efforts can offer a cost- effective way to begin and sustain the process.[8,20] Whether completed internally or with an external partner, the effort should be owned or formally endorsed by the local or state government.

Data Systems: Reliable data is essential for aligning budgets with children's needs and ensuring resources reach those most underserved. Cities can begin by collecting disaggregated data in priority areas — especially for children facing systemic barriers — or testing simple tracking across departments. Gradual improvements in data collection, combined with service gap analyses, can build a more evidence-based, equitable budget over time.[17,20]

Reach and Representation: Children's budgets are most effective when investments are intentionally designed to reach all children, especially those facing the greatest barriers. With transparent children's budgets, governments can integrate children's needs across the budget cycle and align investments with community priorities and strengthen accountability.[17,20]

Impact and Transparency: Even early on, local governments can monitor how investments in children are performing by tracking key outcomes, documenting successes and identifying areas for improvement. Sharing this information through a public-facing children's budget, by highlighting child and youth related expenditures within the broader budget, or through tools such as dashboards, infographics or simple storytelling helps make the impact visible to decision-makers, partners and the public. It also builds support for continued investment in children.[18,21]

CHILDREN'S BUDGETS IN PRACTICE

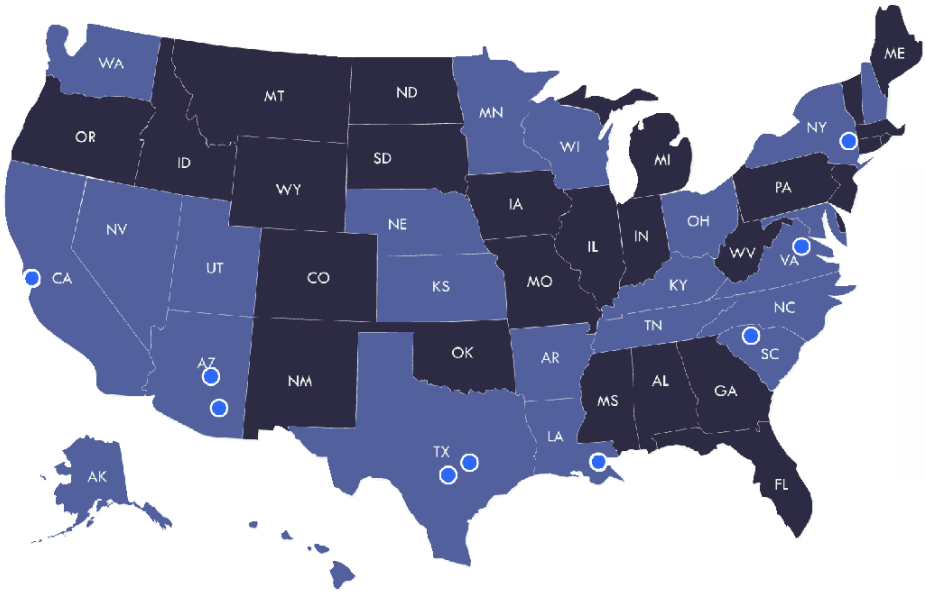
Across the U.S., local and state governments are using a range of innovative approaches to children's budgets that make investments in children more transparent, equitable and responsive to community needs. These examples show how governments can empower youth, expand services and guide strategic public investment.

Santa Clara County, CA – Institutionalizing a Children's Budget: Santa Clara County publishes an annual Children's Budget that makes investments in children, youth and families more visible and connects public resources to children's needs and well-being. The budget complements the County's Child Impact Statements and data efforts, strengthening consideration of children's needs in both policy and resource allocation. Read more here.

Travis County, TX – From Fiscal Transparency to Strategic Investment: In 2024, voters approved a property tax measure generating $75 million annually to expand affordable childcare, improve workforce pay and strengthen system capacity. Travis County hired the nation's first children's funding coordinator, who developed a comprehensive cost model to guide long-term investments. This example shows how dedicated funding and technical expertise can translate community priorities into sustainable, high-impact programs. Read more here. This example highlights how targeted investments can be strengthened through greater visibility, planning and alignment of resources over time.

National Support – Children's Funding Project: Organizations like Children's Funding Project support municipalities through fiscal mapping, cost modeling and funding research, helping governments understand how resources are allocated for children and align investments over time. As a key partner in advancing children's budgeting efforts, they provide practical tools and support to help cities strengthen this work. Read more here. [25]

FIGURE 1: MAP OF STATES, CITIES AND COMMUNITIES WITH FISCAL MAPS (SOURCE: CHILDREN'S FUNDING PROJECT)[25]



GETTING STARTED

Interested in making your local or state government's budget more transparent in how it supports children and youth? A good first step is to **understand how resources are currently allocated for children**. Mapping child-related spending across departments – education, health, social services and others – can help identify gaps, redundancies and opportunities for more strategic investment.[25]

Every municipality will need to tailor its approach to its own circumstances, local structures, staffing, technical capacity and community needs to determine the right approach. The most important step is simply getting started – publishing initial spending analyses or establishing a simple process to track how resources are allocated for children and youth and

begin using that information to inform planning and prioritization. Early successes build credibility, strengthen trust and create a foundation for more ambitious efforts over time.

For practical guidance on mapping spending and the allocation of resources, see resources from Children's Funding Project.[25]

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WHAT TO EXPECT FROM UUSA:

UNICEF USA partners with government leaders, youth and key stakeholders to advance child-centered governance—supporting communities to strengthen how decisions affecting children are made so that policies and systems consistently uphold children's rights and improve their well-being.

What's next: UNICEF USA will roll out tools, guidance, research, and peer learning opportunities to support municipalities at different stages of their journey.

Sign up for our Communities for Every Child newsletter to stay informed about research, advocacy and child-friendly governance initiatives.

Learn more in our full Child-Centered Governance Research-to-Policy Brief series: *Children's Budgets* • *Youth Councils* • *Child Impact Statements* • *Youth Ombuds Offices* • *Children's Cabinets*

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