State of Texas Children 2017

✶ Child Well-Being in the Rio Grande Valley ✶

We all want a bright future for our children, and we want the Rio Grande Valley to be a place that makes that bright future possible. As the area's economy and population grow, its future depends on the health, education, and financial security of all its children – across neighborhood, income, immigration status, race and ethnicity.[1]

Located on the U.S.-Mexico border, the Rio Grande Valley is a place of rich culture and possibilities. However, on many indicators of children's health, education and financial security, the Valley is not doing as well as Texas overall, revealing a pattern of disinvestment in children's futures.

In order to "raise the bar" in child well-being for all Rio Grande Valley area kids, we have to "close the gaps" in outcomes between children. Doing this means intentionally breaking down obstacles and creating equitable opportunities for good health, an excellent education, and economic security for every child. This is the only way to ensure the Rio Grande Valley's economic future is strong for both businesses and families.

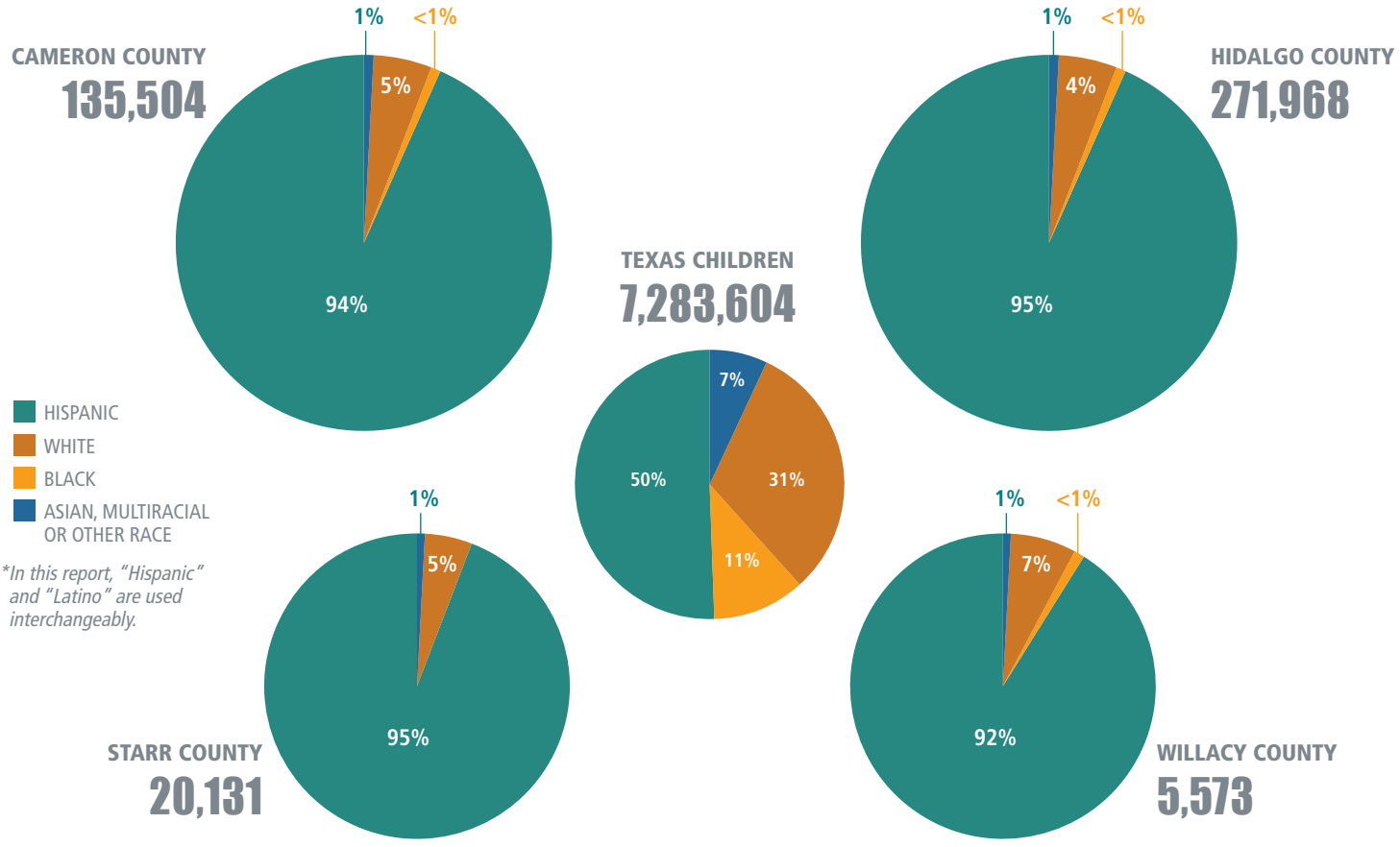
This Rio Grande Valley report is part of a larger series of reports in the Texas Kids Count project that focuses on equity in child well-being across Texas and in several of its major metro areas. See more at CPPP.org/kidscount.

DEMOGRAPHICS

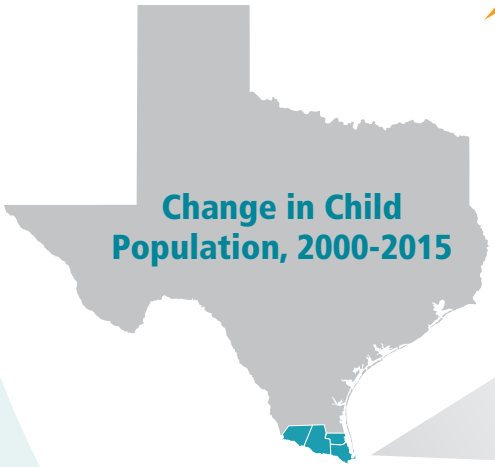
More than 430,000 children live in the Rio Grande Valley, which is made up of four counties: Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, and Willacy.[2] Demographic data are provided on all four counties to give a regional look at the child population. We will focus on Hidalgo and Cameron counties in our analysis of children's financial security, health, and education. Starr and Willacy counties' small populations yield less statistically reliable data, and Cameron and Hidalgo counties are home to 94 percent of children in the Rio Grande Valley. For the remainder of the report, we will use "Rio Grande Valley" to refer to Cameron and Hidalgo counties.

THE PRESENT: Hispanic* children represent the future workforce and leaders of the Rio Grande Valley and of Texas.

Total Child Population, 2015[3]

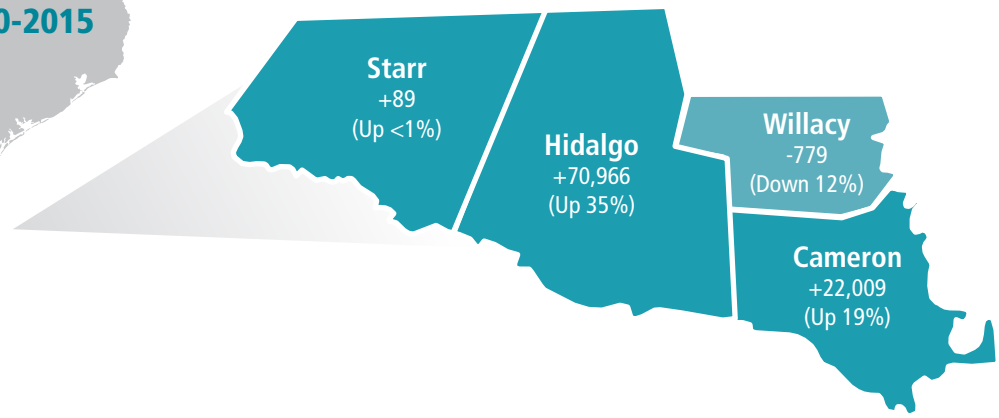


*In this report, "Hispanic" and "Latino" are used interchangeably.



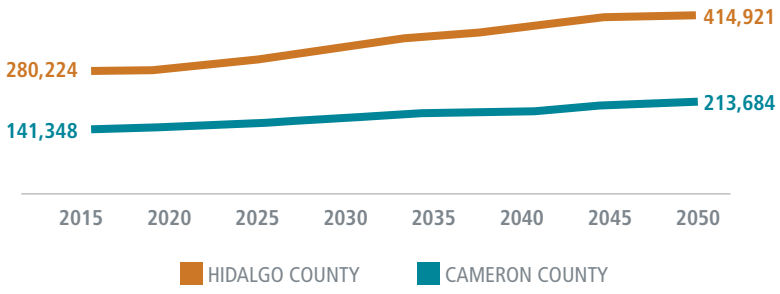
THE PAST: Hidalgo County has experienced the largest and fastest growth in child population in the Rio Grande Valley.

Change in Child Population, 2000-2015[4]



THE FUTURE: In 2050, more than 600,000 children are projected to live in the Rio Grande Valley.

Child Population Projections, 2015-2050[5]



Immigrants in the Rio Grande Valley

Equity Matters: 5 Things to Know about Race, Ethnicity and Immigration Status

Understanding the diverse population of children in immigrant families is one important aspect of improving child well-being in the Rio Grande Valley. Although a full analysis of the well-being of children in these families is beyond the scope of this report, the following information is critical to know.

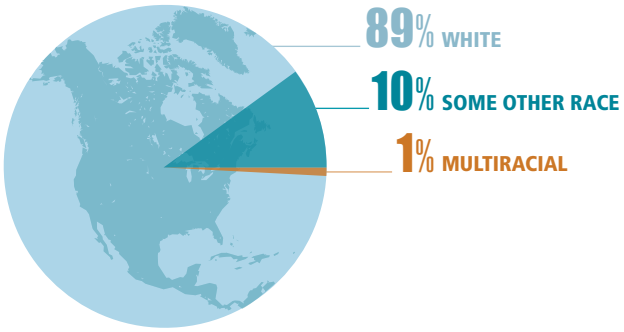
1 Race, ethnicity and immigration status are both distinct and overlapping.

According to the Census Bureau, 95 percent of the more than 400,000 children in the Rio Grande Valley are of Hispanic/Latino ethnicity. Of the children of Hispanic ethnicity who live in the Rio Grande Valley, 89 percent identify their race as White, 10 percent as 'some other race', and one percent as multiracial.[6]

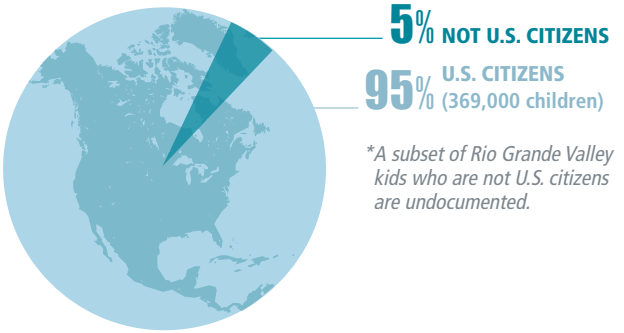
Ninety-five percent of Hispanic children in the Rio Grande Valley are U.S. citizens.[7] The Rio Grande Valley is also home to many Hispanic children whose families have been living in the state since before it became part of the U.S. In fact, about 75 percent of Hispanic children in the Rio Grande Valley have at least one parent who was a U.S. citizen at birth.[8] Only five percent of Hispanic Rio Grande Valley children are not U.S. citizens, and an even smaller subset are undocumented. Researchers use models to estimate the share of undocumented children in Texas to be around five percent.[9]

The vast majority of Hispanic children in the Rio Grande Valley are U.S. citizens.[10]

Children of Hispanic Ethnicity in Texas, by Race, 2015[11]



Citizenship Status of Hispanic Children in Texas 2015[12]



**A subset of Rio Grande Valley kids who are not U.S. citizens are undocumented.*

2 More than half of Rio Grande Valley kids (nearly 215,000) live with one or more parents who is an immigrant.[13]

Of all Texas children with immigrant parents, half live with at least one parent who is not a U.S. citizen (this includes parents who are legally authorized).[14] Statewide, researchers estimate that around 13 percent of children in Texas live with one or more undocumented parents.[15]

Thousands of Rio Grande Valley kids live in immigrant families.[16]

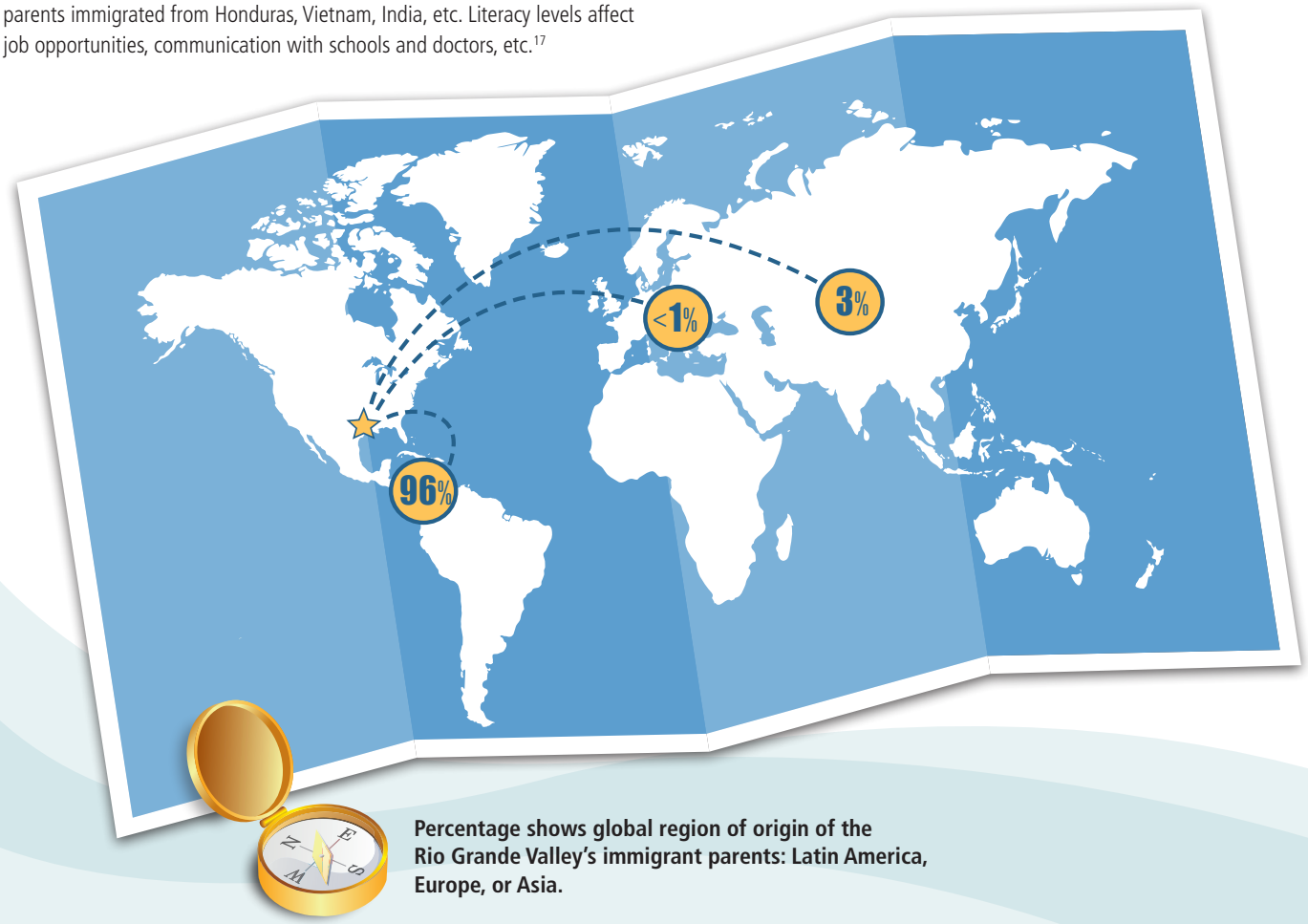
Out of 390,000 kids in Cameron and Hidalgo counties, more than half live with one or more parents who is an immigrant.

Of those, half live with at least one parent who is not a U.S. citizen (this includes parents who are legally authorized).

3 Immigrants in the Rio Grande Valley represent a diverse and complex group.

Rio Grande Valley families that include immigrants differ not only in regard to the countries of birth for parents and children, but legal residency or U.S. citizenship status, English-speaking proficiency, length of time spent living in the U.S., literacy in a native language, education levels and race and ethnicity. Differences in these characteristics influence the challenges and opportunities that families face. For example, children whose parents immigrated from Mexico have different experiences than children whose parents immigrated from Honduras, Vietnam, India, etc. Literacy levels affect job opportunities, communication with schools and doctors, etc.[17]

The vast majority of Rio Grande Valley parents who are immigrants arrive from Latin America, but a growing share arrive from Asia.[18]



Percentage shows global region of origin of the Rio Grande Valley's immigrant parents: Latin America, Europe, or Asia.

4 Children in families that include one or more immigrants fare better on some aspects of child well-being than children with U.S.-born parents.

Children in immigrant families have lower infant mortality rates than children with U.S.-born parents.[19] They are also more likely to be born at a healthy birthweight, decreasing the risk of developmental delays and disabilities.[20] Seventy-five percent of U.S. children in immigrant families live with married parents,[21] compared to 59 percent of children with U.S.-born parents. Research shows that children of married parents have better physical, cognitive, and emotional outcomes.[22]

5 Immigration and economic growth are linked.

Research shows that metropolitan areas in the U.S. with the greatest economic growth also experienced the greatest increase in the labor force attributed to immigrants.[23] Immigration functions as both a cause and effect of growth: growing cities attract workers, and new workers bolster economic growth.[24] Immigrants also power the state economy as job creators, small business owners and entrepreneurs. Immigrants make up 18 percent of Texas business owners with paid employees and are self-employed at a higher rate (nine percent) than the native-born population (six percent).[25] While immigrants in Texas help to grow the state economy, immigrant families are more likely than U.S. born families to live in poverty. Many immigrants work in very low-paying jobs and may not have the same worker protections that higher-paying jobs do (e.g., sick leave, safeguards against wage theft).[26]

PLACE, RACE & POVERTY

The Rio Grande Valley has a unique place in Texas history, but like many Texas regions, a history of discriminatory local practices contributed to the development of separate neighborhoods and schools for children of different backgrounds. Mexican-Americans in the Rio Grande Valley have been denied equal access to opportunity for several generations through discrimination and segregation in schools, neighborhoods, places of employment, and courts.[27] There were no middle or high schools for Hispanic children in the Rio Grande Valley until the late 1920s, and Hispanic children continued to attend segregated and under-resourced schools into the 1970s.[28]

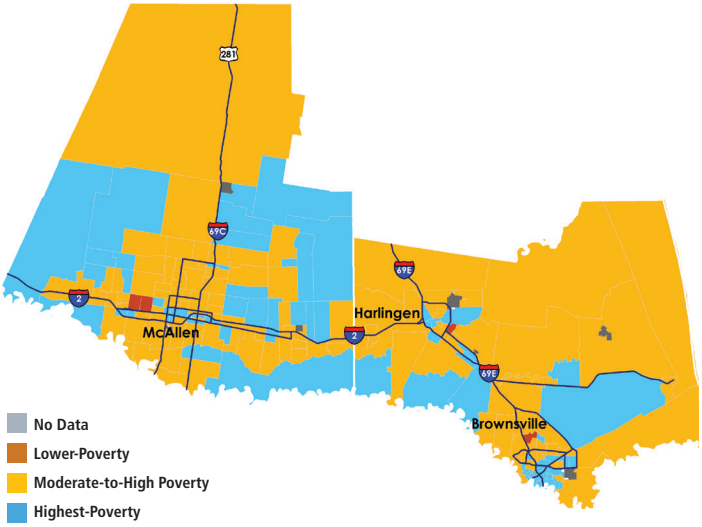
The policies and practices that shaped the Rio Grande Valley still have a profound effect on the present. Barriers in housing, employment, and education contribute to far too many children living in poverty and experiencing other troubling disparities. Today, nearly half of Hispanic children in the Rio Grande Valley live in poverty, compared to 38 percent of Hispanic children statewide.[29] For a faily of four, living in poverty means living on less than $24,500 a year. The Rio Grande Valley has two of the country's 10 poorest metropolitan areas for total population: McAllen-Edinburg-Mission and Brownsville-Harlingen.[30]

Research has found that the "neighborhood effects" of living in high-poverty areas influence not just children in low income families, but all children who live in the area, including children who do not live in poverty themselves.[31] Neighborhoods of concentrated poverty can isolate residents from resources and opportunities. **Sixty-eight percent of children in the Rio Grande Valley live in high-poverty neighborhoods, compared to 18 percent of children statewide.[32]**

Children's opportunities for success can be measured by economic mobility, the degree to which a child's family background predicts the child's future outcomes.[33] Both racial and income segregation are strongly connected to lower rates of economic mobility for all. Children who live in more segregated areas have less economic mobility than children who live in less segregated areas.[34]

Most children in the Rio Grande Valley live in high-poverty areas.

Total Poverty Rate by Census Tract, 2011-2015[35]



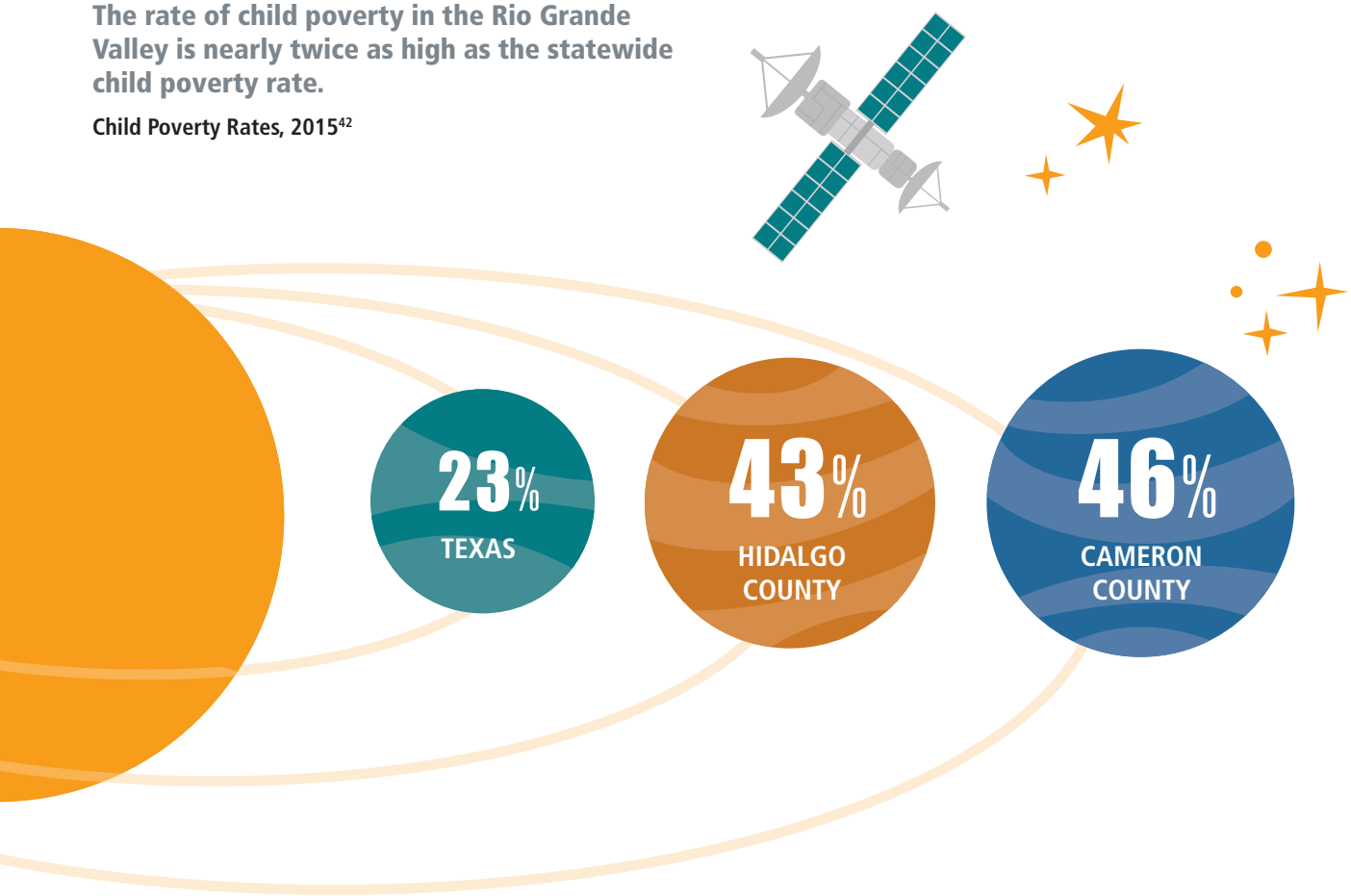
Children growing up in the colonias in the Rio Grande Valley face unique challenges. Colonias are residential communities along the U.S.-Mexico border that often lack the most basic necessities for living (potable water, sewer systems, electricity, paved roads, safe housing, etc.).[36] Colonias were set up by developers who created unincorporated subdivisions on land that couldn't be used for farming. The developers then sold the land to low-income people searching for affordable housing. Little to no infrastructure was provided, and those who buy property in the colonias often construct their homes in phases as they can afford materials.[37]

Colonias are home to thousands of Texans, most of whom are U.S. citizens.[38] Due to the high rates of poverty and lack of public services and infrastructure, colonia residents face hardships that are not seen in the rest of the United States.[39] Serious diseases occur at much higher rates in colonias than in Texas as a whole, and health problems often go untreated. Children growing up in the colonias face barriers in housing, education, and health, which can lead to slowed growth and low educational development rates.[40]

As the colonias have grown, governments and other groups have worked to improve the conditions faced by residents, but limited resources restrict the impacts of programs. Hidalgo County is home to the most colonia residents in Texas, and addressing the needs of colonia residents and their children is critical to the region's future success.[41]

The rate of child poverty in the Rio Grande Valley is nearly twice as high as the statewide child poverty rate.

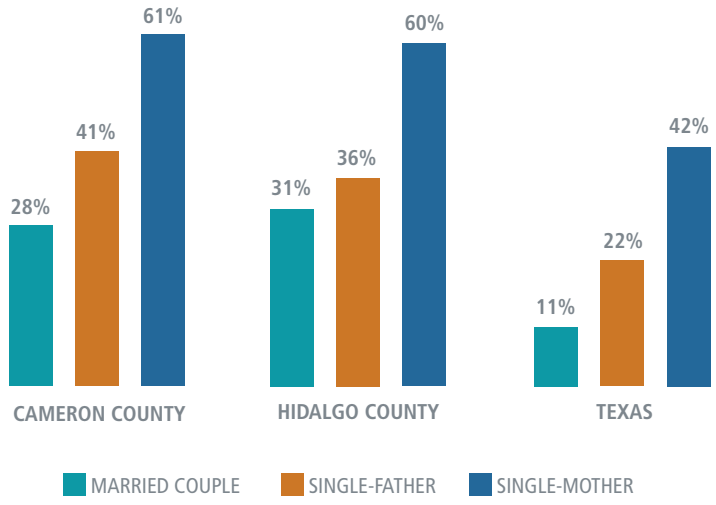
Child Poverty Rates, 2015[42]



Other factors like family structure and gender also influence the likelihood of living in poverty. Single-parent families in the Rio Grande Valley are more likely to live in poverty than married-couple families. Poverty rates for single parents also differ by gender, with single-mother families in the Rio Grande Valley being more likely to live in poverty than a single-father family.[43] These gaps are likely fueled by the persistent earnings gap by gender in Texas, which stems from low pay in jobs with high concentrations of women, reduced earnings potential from taking time off work for caregiving responsibilities, and conscious and unconscious biases.[44]

Poverty is most likely to affect children in families headed by single mothers.

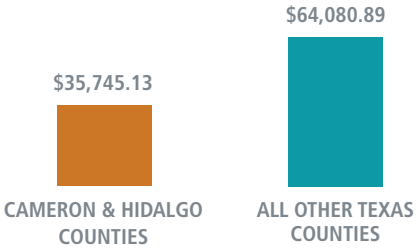
Poverty Rate by Family Type, 2014[45]



The Rio Grande Valley has higher levels of unemployment than Texas. The likelihood of being unemployed in the Rio Grande Valley decreases dramatically with education; those with only a high school diploma are roughly twice as likely to be unemployed as those with a bachelor's degree.[46] Since household income defines poverty, ensuring economic opportunity is available to parents is critical to fighting child poverty. Similarly, providing children with access to higher education or 'on-the-job' learning can also promote pathways out of poverty.[47]

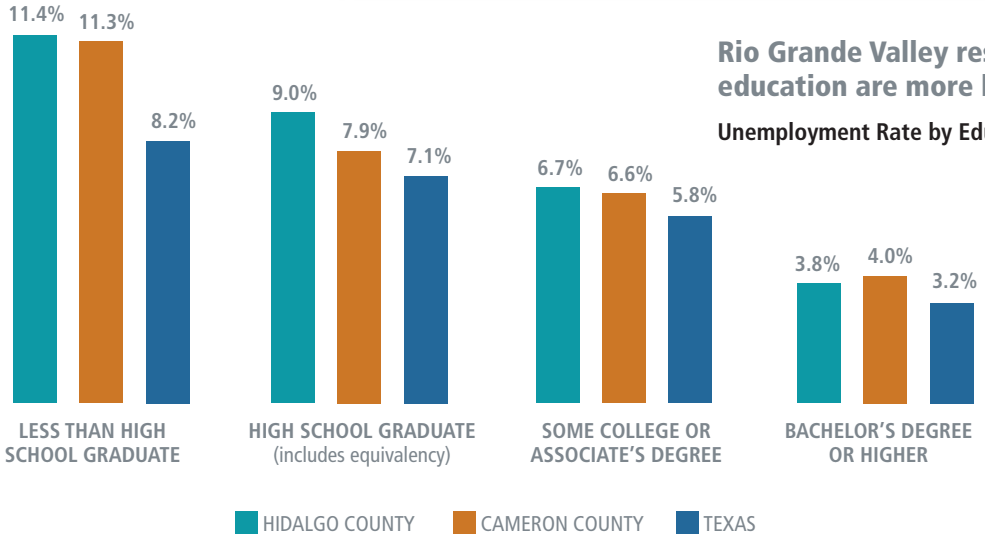
Households with children in the Rio Grande Valley generally have lower incomes than in Texas overall.

Median Income of Households with Children, 2015[48]



Rio Grande Valley residents with lower levels of education are more likely to be unemployed.

Unemployment Rate by Education Level, Ages 25+, 2015[49]



HEALTH

Place and poverty also affect children's health. Raising healthy children is about more than just encouraging kids to eat vegetables and exercise. Health is also about making sure all kids across race, ethnicity, language, or family income, can access healthy meals regularly, live in safe environments, receive preventative health care, and see a doctor when they need to.

Food Insecurity

Thirty percent of children in the Rio Grande Valley (40,800 children in Cameron County and 82,400 children in Hidalgo County) are food insecure, meaning they lack consistent access to enough food for a healthy diet.[50] Statewide, 27 percent of children are food insecure, a symptom of economic instability.[51] When families struggle financially, too little money is left for food, increasing the chance that kids go hungry. When growing children lack essential nutrients, they can experience delays in physical, intellectual, and emotional growth.[52] Hungry children have a harder time focusing in school and are more likely to have social and behavioral problems.[53] Higher obesity rates have been found among food insecure individuals, in part because low-income neighborhoods often lack access to high-quality, healthy foods.[54]

Around 30 percent of children in the Rio Grande Valley lack consistent access to adequate food.

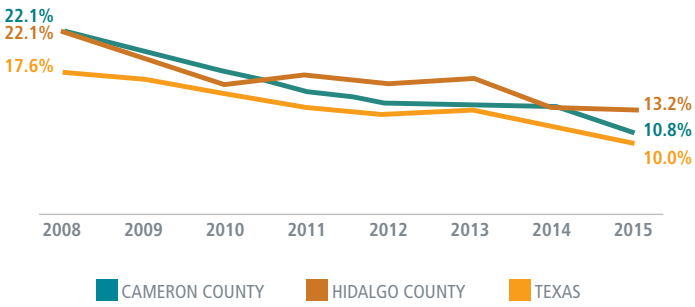
Child Food Insecurity Rate, 2014[55]

Access to Health Care

Consistent access to health care begins with adequate health insurance coverage. The Rio Grande Valley has some of the highest child uninsured rates in Texas.[56] Hispanic children are the most likely to be uninsured, both in the Rio Grande Valley and in the state.[57] One barrier is jobs that do not offer affordable insurance to families. Hispanic children are the least likely to be covered through their parents' employers even though their parents have employment rates similar to, or even higher than other racial/ethnic groups.[58] Hispanic families are also less likely to be aware of the subsidies available to help pay for insurance.[59] Research shows that expanding coverage to low income parents could improve child uninsured rates even more. Furthermore, non-citizens are more likely to worry about immigration-related consequences even if their eligible family member is a citizen or legal resident.[60] These deterrents to health care access for mixed-status families can be exacerbated by the lack of a pathway to citizenship for parents and anti-immigrant legislation, and ultimately can lead to worse health outcomes for children.[61]

Uninsured rates have declined, but Rio Grande Valley children are still uninsured at high rates

Child Uninsured Rates, 2008-2015[62]

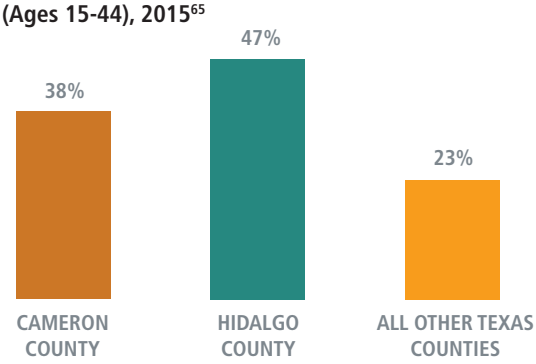


Maternal and Infant Health

Overall health and health care access for women before, during, and after pregnancy is critical to babies' health. Forty-seven percent of women between the ages of 15 and 44 in Hidalgo County lack health insurance, compared to 38 percent in Cameron County and 23 percent statewide.[63] Being uninsured as a woman of childbearing age can lead to delayed or inconsistent care should a woman become pregnant.[64]

Women of childbearing age are significantly more likely to be uninsured in the Rio Grande Valley than in the rest of Texas.

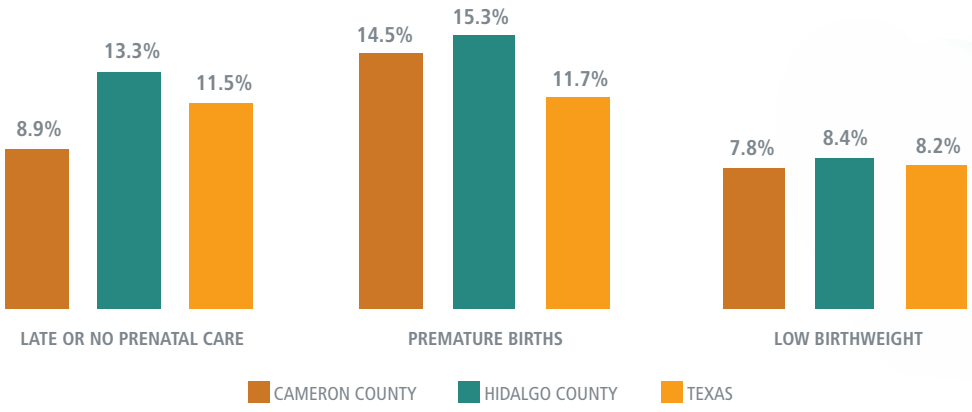
Uninsured Rate for Women of Childbearing Age (Ages 15-44), 2015[65]



The most common barriers reported by Texas mothers with late or no prenatal care are being uninsured, not having enough money for the appointment, and not being able to book an appointment.[66] Black and Hispanic mothers are most likely to have late access to prenatal care.[67] Research also shows that a mother's chronic stress increases the risk of low birthweight and preterm births.[68] In the Rio Grande Valley, premature birthweights are higher on average than in Texas. The rate of mothers receiving late or no prenatal care in Cameron County is much lower than both the rate for Hidalgo County and for births across Texas.[69] Prematurity and low birthweight can both increase the risk of physical and cognitive developmental delays.[70]

Infants in Hidalgo County are at higher risk of low birthweight or premature birth.

Infant Health Indicators, 2015[71]

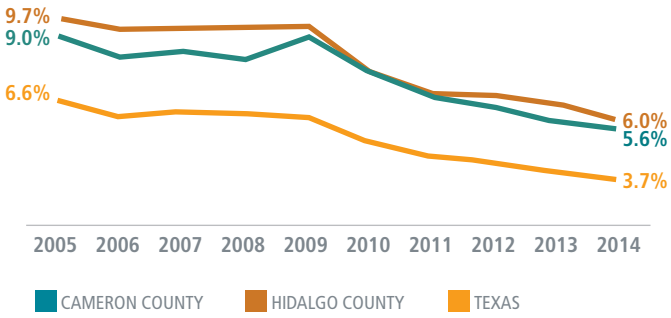


Maternal Mortality is Lower in the Rio Grande Valley than in Texas

In 2014, the maternal mortality rate for Texas women was three times higher than the rate for women in Cameron and Hidalgo counties (three deaths per 10,000 live births in Texas, and one death per 10,000 live births in Cameron and Hidalgo counties).[72] Hispanic women have lower rates of maternal mortality than White or Black women statewide.[73] Research to explain the difference in maternal mortality rates by race/ethnicity is ongoing.[74]

Birth rates for teens have declined but remain higher in the Rio Grande Valley than in Texas overall.

Share of Teen Women Who Gave Birth, 2005-2014[75]



Birth rates for teens have decreased significantly over the past decade but still remain higher in Hidalgo and Cameron counties, where around six percent of teenage women ages 15-19 gave birth in 2014.[76] Children born to teenage mothers are more likely to live in poverty, and teenage mothers are more likely to drop out of school.[77]

EDUCATION

Every kid in the Rio Grande Valley deserves an education that helps her reach her full potential. And we know that different students need different resources and supports to be successful. However, today our education system often struggles to provide equitable opportunities for all children, threatening their futures and our collective economic security.

Low-income Students in the Rio Grande Valley

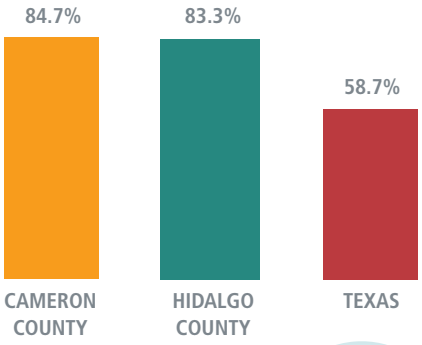
The Valley has higher rates of economically disadvantaged students (students who are eligible for free or reduced-priced meals) than Texas overall.[78] Since most children attend schools they live near, patterns of residential segregation and poverty concentration are reflected in the racial, ethnic and economic makeup of schools and districts.[79]

Research shows that, in general, students in high-poverty schools (in which more than 75 percent of students qualify for free or reduced lunch) have less access to effective teachers than students in low-poverty schools.[80] High-poverty schools also serve more students who are more likely to face out-of-school challenges that research shows are connected to academic readiness, test performance and educational achievement. These challenges include housing instability,[81] food insecurity[82] and lack of access to health care.[83]

Although low-income students face additional barriers, they are not insurmountable. High-poverty districts in Texas can and do perform well, and sometimes even better than school districts with more affluent students. A prime example is the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District in Hidalgo County, which is predominantly low-income and outperforms state averages on high school graduation rates. It has accomplished this by focusing on high expectations and high-quality curriculum for all students, supporting teachers and improving teacher practices, creating multiple opportunities for student success, and promoting a deep belief in equity.[84]

Students in the Rio Grande Valley are more likely to be economically disadvantaged than students across Texas.

Percent of Economically Disadvantaged Students, 2014-2015[85]



School funding matters for Rio Grande Valley kids.

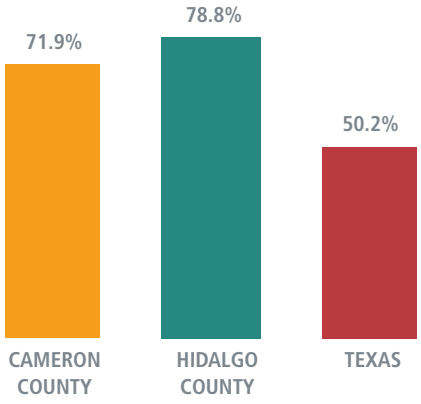
Texas' school finance system does not adequately fund public education. **Most school funding comes from local property taxes that are generated based on the value of property wealth within school districts.** That means school districts that include homes or businesses with high property values can generate more tax money than school districts that include homes or businesses with lower property values. More financial resources mean better compensation, development, and support of teachers and staff, and better access to materials and equipment like books, science labs, art, music and technology.[86]

Although external factors like poverty and health greatly affect students' learning, the most important in-school influence on education is the quality of teaching.[87] Research has shown that increased investments in low-income districts lead to short-term outcomes like narrowing of SAT score gaps[88] and also long-term benefits like increased likelihood of completing high school.[89] Investment can also lead to an increased likelihood of enrolling in college and earning a postsecondary degree,[90] and increased income in adulthood.[91]

Increased investment in Pre-K in particular is shown to improve school readiness, better develop social and behavioral skills, reduce grade retention, and improve standardized test scores.[92] While Pre-K enrollment in the Rio Grande Valley is on par with rates across the state, thousands of children in Hidalgo and Cameron counties are not accessing this valuable stage in education.[93]

Pre-K enrollment for four-year-olds is higher in the Rio Grande Valley than in Texas.

Pre-K Enrollment for Children Age 4, 2014-2015[94]

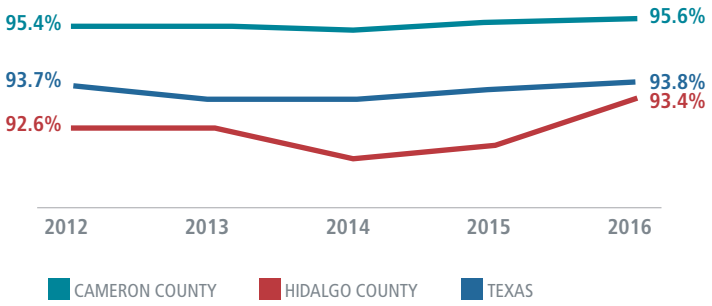


Public education is essential to building the Rio Grande Valley's future workforce. The Texas Constitution guarantees the right of education to all Texas kids, regardless of citizenship status or primary language.[95] Unfortunately, disparities exist in educational outcomes by place, citizenship status, and English as a Second Language (ESL) status.[96]

One important indicator of educational achievement is high school completion. Without this credential, the chances of living in poverty are far higher. Students in the Rio Grande Valley complete high school at lower rates than students across the state.[97]

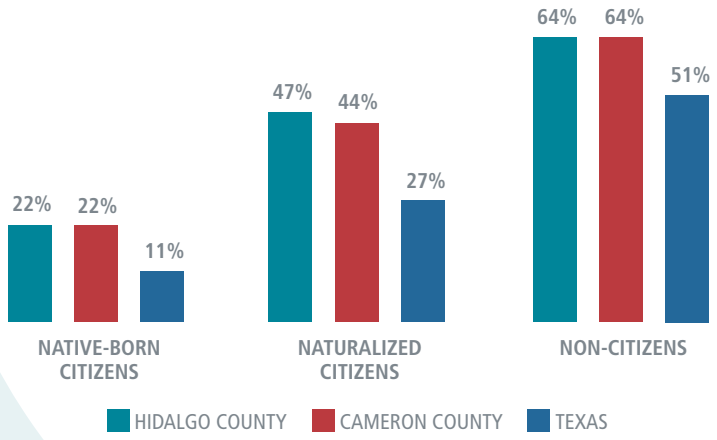
High school completion rates in Hidalgo County have improved, and completion rates are higher in Cameron County than in Texas overall.

High School Completion Rates, 2011-2015[98]



Adults of all immigration statuses in the Rio Grande Valley are more likely than other Texans to lack a high school education.

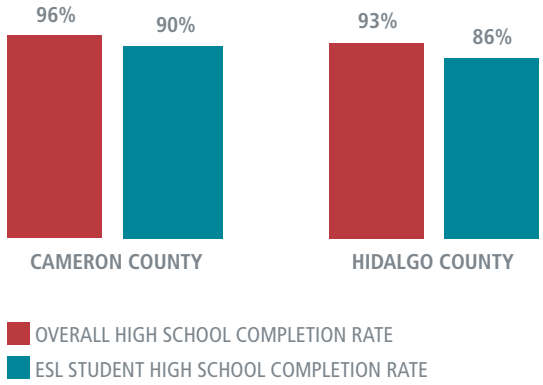
Percent of Adults 18+ Without a High School Degree, 2015[99]



Rio Grande Valley schools are home to 282,600 students in bilingual or ESL programs.[100] These schools need additional resources for students who are bilingual or English Language Learners, and early childhood programs in the regions should support English-language learning.[101] Currently, ESL high school completion rates in the Rio Grande Valley lag behind overall completion rates; of all ESL students, only 90 percent in Cameron County and 86 percent in Hidalgo County complete high school in four years.[102] Research has shown that college graduates who speak a second language earn higher wages than those who only speak English.[103]

Rio Grande Valley ESL students have lower high school completion rates.

High School Completion Rate, 2016[104]



CONCLUSION

The Rio Grande Valley can be a place where every child has the basic building blocks – health, education, and financial security – to reach his or her full potential. Accomplishing this depends on enacting common-sense public policies and practices that develop the capabilities in all kids.

Equity in child well-being – by neighborhood, income, immigration status, race and ethnicity– should be a value reflected by our decisions, and a goal for all of us. The Rio Grande Valley can continue to build on its rich history by not only creating strong, equity-focused policies at the local level, but also using its strength of experience and influence to ensure that legislators support their efforts at the state level.

By raising the bar and closing the gaps in child well-being across place, income, immigration status, race and ethnicity, the Rio Grande Valley can capitalize on the strengths of its child population and provide greater opportunity for all children to reach their potential.

This report was authored by Kristie Tingle, Research Analyst, Madeline Haynes, Research and Planning Intern, and DongMei Li, Research and Planning Intern, as part of Texas Kids Count, a project of the Center for Public Policy Priorities. The research was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Methodist Healthcare Ministries of South Texas, Inc. For endnotes and sources, visit CPPP.org/kidscount.

THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

Methodist Healthcare Ministries OF SOUTH TEXAS, INC. "Serving Humanity to Honor God"

ENDNOTES

1. We generally use the term "White" for "Non-Hispanic White" or "Anglo" and "Black" for "Black" or "African-American." "Hispanic" and "Latino" are used interchangeably as a separate category, mutually exclusive of the racial categories "White" and "Black".
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