

NEWARK KIDS COUNT

DATA SNAPSHOT 2025

Positive Youth Development in Newark

By Alena Siddiqui and Keith Hadad

Positive Youth Development, one of Advocates for Children of New Jersey's (ACNJ) newest initiatives, focuses on the intersection of safety, wellness, and education, elevating the strengths of youth and their community. ACNJ examined several data indicators that provide some insight into how youth in Newark are faring, including chronic absenteeism, graduation rates, and juvenile arrests, all of which have improved in the Brick City. The city of Newark has made significant strides in supporting and helping youth succeed in both school and the community.



Connecting Young People to Mental Health Resources

Mental health is one of the most important components connected to positive youth development and deeply intertwined with a youth's physical health, their capacity to manage emotions and create meaningful social relationships, and their overall cognitive functioning, which together form their experiences and trajectories throughout adolescence (Suppiej, Longo, & Pettoello-Mantovani, 2025).

In December 2021, toward the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, Surgeon General Vivek Murthy issued an advisory raising the alarm on the growing mental health crisis among youth. While mental health challenges were on the rise, the pandemic exacerbated the stresses young people faced, further compounded by the lack of services.

Addressing the Youth Mental Health Crisis: New Jersey Statewide Student Support Services (NJ4S)

NJ4S supports youth mental health and promotes prevention initiatives, such as bullying and teen suicide, through a statewide hub-and-spoke model of resources and services.

To determine which districts are most in need of mental health support, NJ4S worked with the Office of Applied Research & Evaluation to develop the School District Needs Index. This tool analyzed various factors to identify a school district's strongest needs and potential root causes of problems facing youth.

Through the use of the School District Needs Index, NJ4S set up 15 treatment service centers, or hubs, across the state to provide preventive and "brief intervention" mental health services to more public school students (New Jersey Department of Children and Families). Contracted community organizations, in partnership with local advisory boards, engage and manage the hubs to ensure that the programming and services reflect the individual needs of each region. (NJ Department of Children and Families, 2025, pg. 4)

NJ4S uses a three-tiered, targeted intervention approach:

Tier 1 provides universal support, like webinars, workshops, assemblies and training to all New Jersey students, their parents, caregivers, and school faculty.

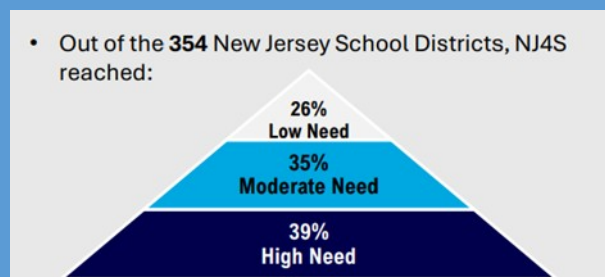
Tier 2 offers small-group programming for at-risk students, like individualized prevention programs, mentoring, or light classroom support.

Tier 3 provides brief clinical interventions for youth who are being referred and connected to a community provider to support ongoing mental health treatment.

To access Tier two and three services, students need to apply through their school. For more information, please visit <https://nj4s.nj.gov>.

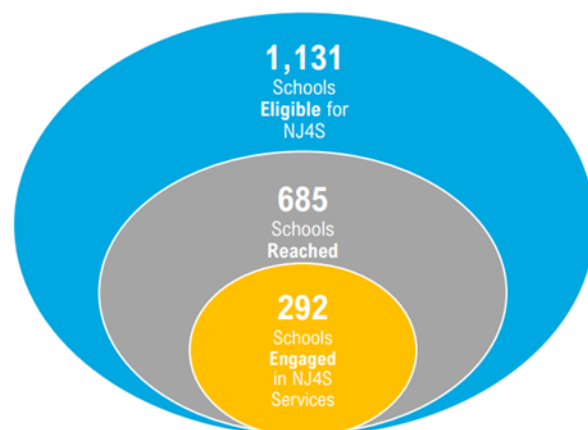
NJ4S noted in their 2023-2024 Annual Report that, out of the 1,131 schools eligible for their services, 695 had at least one school representative sign up for Tier 2 or Tier 3 services, and 292 schools filed an application for Tier 2 or Tier 3 services through the NJ4S portal.

High demand has created waitlists in some county Hubs. In the Essex county Hub for example, 30 students were recently in line for Tier 3 support programs.



Source: NJ Department of Children and Families, 2025, pg. 4

Engagement means a school has filed an application for **Tier 2** or **Tier 3** services through the NJ4S portal. During the 2023-2024 school year, NJ4S engaged with **201** school districts (34%).



The New Jersey Department of Education reports that for children 13-17 years old, 16% experienced mood disorders, 20% experienced behavioral disorders, and 34% experienced anxiety disorders, citing 2024 national data from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

In 2023, Governor Murphy announced the launch of the New Jersey Department of Children and Families' New Jersey Statewide Student Support Services (NJ4S) in response to the steep rise in statewide rates of youth and young adult anxiety, depression, and stress that worsened from the COVID-19 pandemic and state shutdown (New Jersey Department of Children and Families, n.d.)

When youth and families who need mental wellness support are able to access services, they have a greater chance of

thriving. Newark youth can access Family Connections, the contracted Essex hub of NJ4S program created to support communities in addressing the mental health crisis. With staff trained in areas to maximize effectiveness in Newark's diverse populations, like cultural humility, Family Connections offers a range of services tailored for Essex County, including evidence-based violence/bullying prevention, cognitive behavioral intervention programs, support groups for students affected by trauma and individual and group counseling for students who struggle with depression, anxiety, and other mental health concerns (Family Connections). To find more information about Family Connections, please visit <https://www.familyconnections.nj.org/nj4s/about-us/>.

Chronic Absenteeism: Student Engagement and School Environment Challenges

The high demand for mental health services provided by NJ4S points to deeper community needs that impact educational stability. For instance, chronic absenteeism can be a symptom of poor school engagement or school environment challenges. Youth who are stressed, hungry, in pain, or who have unaddressed learning or behavioral issues may have difficulty focusing in school. These students can become distracted or disinterested, leading to absenteeism or discipline issues. NJ4S' School District Needs Index found chronic absenteeism positively correlates across the state with higher rates of poverty and homelessness, suicide attempts, and domestic violence (New Jersey Department of Children and Families, 2022).

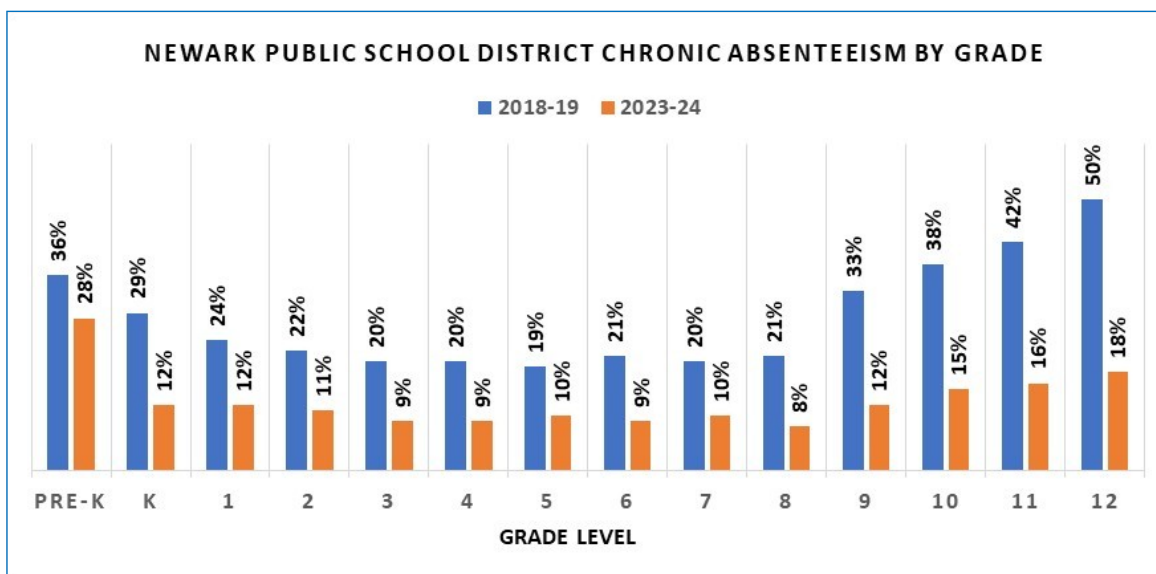
Chronic absenteeism is defined as a student missing 10% or more of the school year for any reason, including locally excused and unexcused absences. There are many consequences to chronic absenteeism, such as lower levels of social engagement, lower chances of graduating high school or attending college, and higher chances of dropping out of school (Lara, 2018). During the 2023-24 school year, the Newark Public School (NPS) District had a 12% absenteeism rate, which was lower than the state rate of 15%, as reported by the NJ Department of Education's School Performance Report. The NPS rate is more than two times lower than the pre-pandemic rate of 27% in 2018-19. In addition, about 7% of NPS students had no days absent in 2023-24, compared to 4% in 2018-19.* The NPS District was able to achieve this positive trend through early outreach. Previously, the District waited four days of absence before contacting parents, but calls are now made on day one (Santana, 2025).

The chronic absenteeism rate decreased across many grade levels in the District, most notably among high school students, who saw a significant decline.

Graduation and Career Success

A person's chances of obtaining higher-paying jobs and improving overall health are increased with a high school diploma. In 2018-19, 76% of NPS students graduated in four years compared to the New Jersey rate of 91%. During the 2019-20 school year, the COVID-19 pandemic and state shutdown resulted in remote learning. The NPS District has been experiencing a gradual increase in graduation rates, as seen in the NJ Department of Education's 4-year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate data. Governor Murphy waived the standardized Math and English tests required to graduate high school (Wall, 2020). Students scheduled to graduate but who do not meet the graduation assessment requirement in Mathematics or English Language Arts can satisfy it through an alternative method that involves submitting a portfolio of required documents demonstrating proficiency in these subjects. For more information visit <https://www.nj.gov/education/assessment/requirements/>.

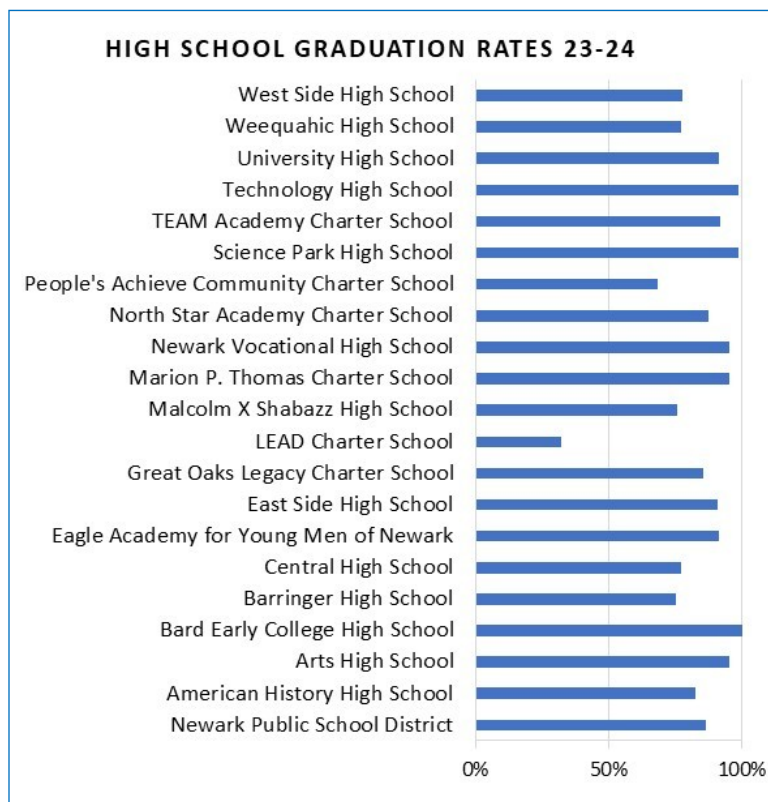
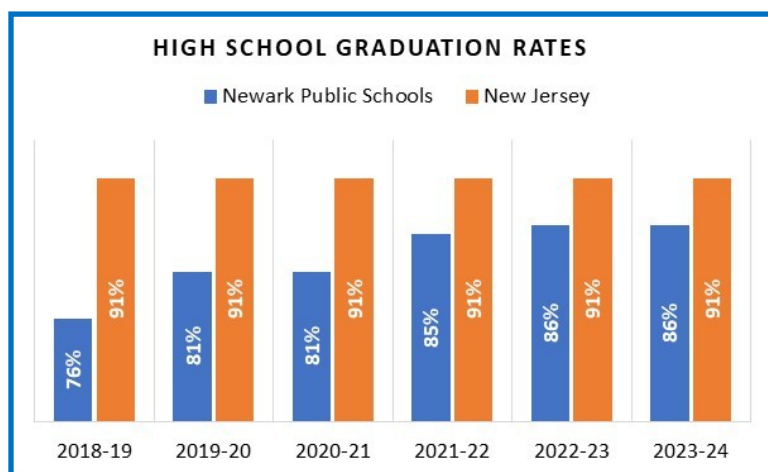
Superintendent Roger León reported that for the class of 2020, “zero students were denied graduation due to failure to meet graduation assessment requirements”. The graduation rate rose to 81% (Wall, 2020). Since then, the New Jersey Graduation Proficiency Assessment (NJGPA) became a graduation requirement. NPS District’s graduation rate continues to improve, reaching 86% in 2023-24. Of the twenty high schools in Newark, including high schools in the NPS District and Charter School Districts, ten had graduation rates of 90% or higher in 2023-24.





Building Bridges to Higher Education

Prospective students and their families planning for post-secondary education have options to make education more affordable and attainable, clearing the path to a more positive and successful future. Beginning in the 2021-22 school year, NPS enacted a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion requirement for 2022 graduates and offered the option to complete the NJ Alternative Financial Aid Application (NJAFSA) for eligible graduates (NBOE, 2021). In 2022, the FAFSA completion rate for Newark (including district, charter, magnet, and specialized county schools) was 63%, an increase from 56% in 2021, according to data collected by the Joseph C. Cornwall Center for Metropolitan Studies and the Newark City of Learning Collaborative (NJCF, 2024). The success of the FAFSA completion requirement at NPS informed New Jersey's passage of A1181/S2054 in January 2024, which made FAFSA completion a high school graduation requirement statewide unless the student's family chooses to opt out (Kim, 2024). This law helps to ensure that more students receive financial aid for post-secondary and vocational training and to encourage more students to pursue these educational routes (Kim, 2024). Since the adoption of this requirement, both New Jersey and Newark have seen an increase in FAFSA completion (Kim, 2024). The National College Attainment Network (NCAN) FAFSA tracker lists New Jersey as second in the country for FAFSA completion at 71% and the city of Newark (Newark Public School District and Charter Schools) at 75% as of September 19, 2025, for 2025 graduating seniors (NCAN, 2025). The higher percentage of FAFSA completions is a hopeful indicator that more Newark high school graduates will pursue post-secondary education as they recognize that college can be more affordable. During the 2021-22 school year, 46% NPS high school graduates enrolled in a post-secondary institution in Fall 2022, and in the following year, almost 50% were enrolled in post-secondary education for Fall 2023, with 75% enrolled in a 4-year institution.



One option for financial assistance for post-secondary education is Pell grants, but new policy changes will impact this aid. Pell grants are usually awarded to undergraduate students with significant financial need who do not hold a bachelor's, graduate, or professional degree. Pell grant award amounts can change, and for the 2025-26 school year, the maximum award is \$7,395 (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). The One Big Beautiful Bill, or HR1, will make some changes that go into effect July 1, 2026, including ineligibility for the Pell grant if a student is

receiving other non-Title IV grant aid, such as non-federal sources like college scholarships, that together equal or exceed the cost of attendance (Zampini, 2025). HR1 has also created a Workforce Pell grant program that will provide Pell grants to eligible short-term, career-focused programs. For more information on how HR1 has affected federal student aid, visit <https://understandingfafsa.org/big-beautiful-bill-what-students-need-to-know/>.

In an interview with ACNJ, Newark resident Stephan Young spoke about the importance of the many support programs available to Newark's youth, including the four-year Guaranteed Education Program. This program covers tuition for select majors at Saint Elizabeth University for 40 students in Newark households seeking higher education, allowing them to focus more of their time and energy on their studies instead of worrying about working to make ends meet. The program expanded in 2024 to include a partnership with Rutgers-Newark, which admitted 13 Newark students (including Young) to a debt-free college education for all four years (City of Newark, 2024).

"[The youth] have career courses. They have the Guaranteed Education Program, of which I'm a part of, which pays for your whole four years, for your housing and your meal plans, so you don't have to worry, you don't have to stress about money. You can take care of your loved ones, because they give you a place to live, they put food in your mouth and things like that" (ACNJ, 2024). To learn more about the Guaranteed Education Program at Saint Elizabeth University, please visit <https://www.steu.edu/news/newark-launches-guaranteed-education-pilot-program-with-saint-elizabeth.html>. To learn more about the Rutgers-Newark Guaranteed Education Program, please visit <https://www.newark.rutgers.edu/news/newark-mayor-officials-join-rutgers-newark-leaders-announce-fully-funded-education-plan-13>.

Groups and programs that aim to improve PYD in Newark

Providers and researchers identify a supportive network of peer groups, community and school involvement, and caring adults as factors that helps protect young people from being led into problematic behavior or trouble. Many programs and organizations aim to support and improve positive youth development at the state, county, and city levels.

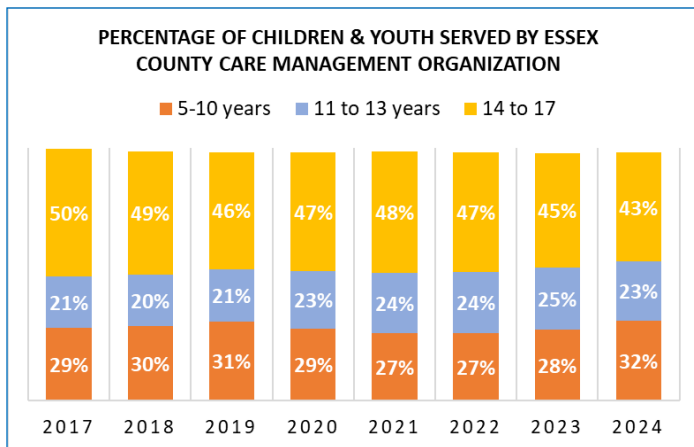
To find some of these groups and programs in Newark, parents and youth can use an interactive map of youth programs in the city, available through Newark Thrives, in partnership with United Way of Greater Newark. This valuable and extensive map can be filtered by specific interests to provide more targeted results. To use this map, please visit <https://newarkthrivesuw.org/youth-program-locator/>.

Newark Youth One-Stop Career Center (NYOSCC), governed by the Newark Workforce Development Board, is another valuable resource available to youth and young adults, ages 14-24 years, and provides services like a career pathway program, financial education/literacy, and a mentoring program (Newark Youth One Stop Career Center, n.d.). Each year, the NYOSCC serves between 5,000 and 7,000 youth (Newark Youth One Stop Career Center).

The Partnership for Children of Essex (PCE), the state contracted care management organization (CMO) for Essex County, is committed to providing individualized support to children and teens with complex needs, including developmental, emotional/behavioral, and substance use. As part of New Jersey's Children's System of Care, PCE's ultimate goal is to keep youth safe in their homes, schools, and communities. Parents and caretakers can access PCE's services out of concern for a youth's mental or behavioral health or developmental disability, by first calling PerformCare at 1-877-652-7624.

Table 1 shows the breakdown of the ages of children and youth served by the Partnership for Children of Essex County's CMO. The data show that, over time, the number of children served by a CMO has increased. The increase, especially for young children, is startling and also shows the need for support from CMOs like the Partnership for Children of Essex.

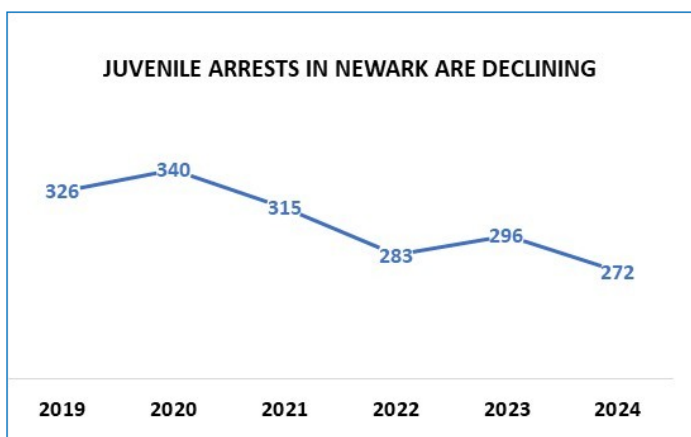
	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Under 5	<10*	27	38	36	29	41	52	47
5-10 years	547	629	730	596	550	613	712	796
11 to 13 years	394	430	493	472	491	565	631	590
14 to 17	962	1,041	1,086	981	992	1,089	1,156	1,082
Total Under 18 years	1,911	2,127	2,347	2,085	2,062	2,308	2,551	2,515



Since 2014, My Brother's Keeper Newark (MBKN) has supported boys and young men of color by advancing education and workforce opportunities, addressing racial disparities, and reducing incarceration. Its report, *Driving Systemic Change for Boys & Young Men of Color in Newark*, highlights data across six key milestones, from school readiness to post-secondary success and safety from violent crime. Newark is one of only four cities nationally recognized by President Barack Obama as My Brother's Keeper Model Communities, for its work in keeping youth safe from violence. To read the full report, visit <https://www.mbknewark.org/public-reports>.

Engaging Youth: Building Connections and Community Safety

To create a safer environment while reducing violence and trauma among Newark youth, Mayor Ras J. Baraka founded The Newark Community Street Team (NCST) in 2014. The Street Team's strategy relies on an evidence-based, trauma-informed approach to minimizing violence. They train and deploy outreach workers and high-risk interventionists in Newark's West and South Wards to provide casework and other services to those at high risk of becoming a perpetrator or victim of violence (Newark Community Street Team, n.d.).



However, given recent grant cuts, including two federal grants that totaled \$3 million over three years, the Newark Community Street Team's future could be in jeopardy (Mooney, 2025). To contribute to their efforts visit <https://www.newarkcommunitystreetteam.org/donate/>.

The United Community Corporation, a community action agency, established the Restorative Transformative Justice program in 2024 to provide at-risk youth and families in Newark with essential resources to promote violence prevention and peaceful conflict resolution. With RTJ hubs established in Camden, Paterson, Newark, and Trenton, this program helps young people make positive life choices that would reduce initial and repeat involvement with the youth justice system (Newark Opportunity Youth Network).

Between 2019 and 2024, there was a 17% decrease in juvenile arrests in Newark, which may be a reflection of the city's increased efforts to engage youth. The city of Newark enforces a youth summer curfew prohibiting anyone under 18 from being on the streets between 11 pm and 5:30 am (Santana, 2025). When Newark began reinforcing summer curfews in 2024, juvenile arrests decreased by 7% (Santana, 2025). The city is reinforcing the youth summer curfew with an outreach team of case managers, law enforcement, and trauma recovery workers to engage with youth who are out after curfew by offering guidance, transportation, and services (Santana, 2025).

Conclusion

Data related to chronic absenteeism, graduation rates, the percentage of FAFSA forms completed, and juvenile arrests in Newark are all trending in a positive direction. There are federal, state, city, and grant-funded programs that support the positive development of Newark youth. Continued funding for these programs will increase their chances of success. ACNJ will continue to monitor these trends through our Newark Kids Count project. Visit www.acnj.org for more data related to the well-being of Newark children and families in [Newark Kids Count 2024](#).

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