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Twenty-fifth Edition of *KIDS COUNT Data Book* Highlights Improvements in Health, Safety, Education and Decline in Teen Birth Rate Since 1990

National, State Policy Changes Have Resulted in Positive Changes for Children, but More are Living in High-Poverty Neighborhoods and in Single-Parent Families

MISSOULA -- Demographic, social and economic changes combined with major policy developments have affected the lives of lower-income children in both positive and negative ways since 1990, according to the Annie E. Casey Foundation's 25th edition of its annual *KIDS COUNT Data Book*. Despite notable improvements, however, Montana currently ranks 31st nationally in terms of child well-being, down from 28 in 2013. The Annie E. Casey Foundation's national ranking of child well-being is based on 16 indicators across four domains: Economic Well-being, Education, Health, and Family & Community. The state's rank within the Family & Community domain remains unchanged at 14, as does the rank within the Health domain, at 50. However, Montana's ranking dropped from 15 to 25 in the Economic Well-being domain, and from 13 to 21 in the Education domain.

"Montana's Education ranking dropped, despite improvements in preschool attendance, 8th grade math proficiency and on-time graduation," says Thale Dillon, director of Montana KIDS COUNT, the Annie E. Casey Foundation's state grantee, hosted in the Bureau of Business & Economic Research at the University of Montana. "We have seen a slight drop in 4th grade reading proficiency, which puts the state on par with the national average," Dillon continues. She attributes the drop in ranking to the fact that other states have performed substantially better than Montana in these areas.

Montana's ranking in the Economic Well-being domain also slipped, as more children than last year live in poverty, and a larger number of teens find themselves not in school and not working. Compared to last year's *Data Book*, there has been no change in the number of children whose parents lack secure employment, and the number of children living in households with a high housing cost burden has improved only slightly.

For the second year in a row, the Annie E. Casey Foundation rankings put Montana dead last among the states in the Health domain, attributable in large part to the fact that the state's rates for child and teen deaths and for teen alcohol and drug abuse are the highest in the nation. "We have so far to go in these two areas that a small improvement in the number of children without health insurance coverage makes little difference," says Dillon. "Additionally, we've seen Montana's rate of low-birth weight births climb, from one of the lowest rates in the country to being on par with the national average."

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While Montana's ranking in the Family & Community domain remained unchanged from last year, there were still changes within that category of indicators. Bucking a positive national trend, Montana saw a higher number of children living in families where the household head is lacking a high school diploma. However, fewer children are living in high-poverty areas around the state, and fewer babies are being born to teens. Still, approximately 30 percent of children live in single-parent families. While unchanged since 2013, the state ranks 5th best.

According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation's *2014 KIDS COUNT Data Book*, Montana's trends are going counter to national trends in a number of areas, most notably when it comes to child and teen deaths. At the national level, these death rates have been declining, approaching a rate that is near 50 percent lower than Montana's. The declines observed across the nation are attributed to increased use of seat belts, car seats and bike helmets, as well as to medical advances. "Given that traffic crashes are the most frequent cause of death for Montana children and teens, increasing the use of seat belts, car seats, and bike helmets in the state would put us on the path to declining child and teen death rates as well," concludes Dillon.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation has developed thriving partnerships with state and national advocates for children over the past 25 years, and has brought steady attention to how kids are faring. According to Laura Speer, Casey's associate director for policy reform and advocacy: "The *Data Book* highlights the achievements of advocates across the country that have been critical in advancing increased investment in effective programs and services to help ensure that kids get the best possible start in life."

The *KIDS COUNT Data Book* features the latest data on child well-being for every state, the District of Columbia and the nation. This information is available in the [KIDS COUNT Data Center](#), which also contains the most recent national, state and local data on hundreds of measures of child well-being. Data Center users can create rankings, maps and graphs for use in publications and on websites, and view real-time information on mobile devices.

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