

UNDER EMBARGO until Tuesday, July 21, 2015, 12:01 a.m. EDT

Contact:

Apreill Hartsfield

(334) 301-4191

ahartsfield@alavoices.org

More Alabama Children Live in Low-Income Working Families Today Than in Midst of Great Recession

Economic Recovery Bypasses Alabama's Children, Lack of State General Fund Budget Intensifies Plight of Working Poor Families

MONTGOMERY, Ala. – Nearly 300,000 children are living in poverty in Alabama, a five percent increase since 2008, according to the 2015 *KIDS COUNT*[®] *Data Book* released today by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

The *Data Book* is an annual publication that examines child well-being across the country. This year's *Data Book* focuses on key trends in child well-being in the post-recession years, measuring child well-being in four domains: economic well-being, education, health, and family and community. Key findings from the report shows that economic recovery in the form of increasing employment and concentrated wealth has bypassed many low-income, struggling communities and families, where a child's future is anchored in scarcity and hardship.

“All sectors in our nation must work to ensure that the economic recovery reaches all families, especially those who are losing ground in our recent prosperity,” said Patrick McCarthy, president and CEO of the Casey Foundation. “Even though we've seen an increase in employment in recent years, many of these jobs are low-wage and cannot support even basic family expenses. The outcome is that millions of families are still struggling to provide for the day-to-day needs of their children.”

Despite some incremental improvements in child well-being, Alabama has consistently ranked among the bottom 10 states and has experienced one of the highest poverty rates nationally for a number of years. The 2015 *Data Book* shows Alabama slipping from 44th to 45th in overall child well-being.

“The state's economic crisis has deeply affected the lives of Alabama's children and at a time when our state is seeing progress on some indicators of child well-being, we can't help but be discouraged that the number of children living in poverty has increased since 2008,” said Melanie R. Bridgeforth, MSW, VOICES for Alabama's Children's executive director. “Poverty does not determine the fate of a child, but it can impede their optimum development. Children cannot alter their family's economic circumstances which is why it is imperative for our state leaders to make meaningful investments and do no harm to programs and services that provide opportunities for working poor families.”

Although parents are working, they still often struggle to provide health care and child care – both of which are essential to child well-being and keeping parents employed. State and federal investments in health and education can create lasting positive changes for children. Investments in critical services such as the subsidized child care program, for example, helps low-income families pay their child care fees. This critical work support program aids working poor families in overcoming extraordinary challenges.

The 2015 *Data Book* also shows that poverty affects children of color at a higher rate than their white peers. There are several contributing factors to wealth disparities that are difficult to overcome including generational poverty and limited access to higher-paying jobs. Limited access to quality early learning opportunities can perpetuate poverty by widening the academic achievement gap between children of color and their white peers.

Alabama's First Class Pre-K program has been instrumental in reducing the achievement gap for low-income children and children of color. As the state's voluntary pre-k program, it provides effective, high-quality early childhood experiences that prepare Alabama's children for school success and lifelong learning. The program has been championed by a mix of sectors in Alabama including business leaders, lawmakers and child advocates because it effectively prepares children to be successful in school and later in life as they enter the workforce.

Similar programs with successful track records such as child day care subsidies, mental health services, and Medicaid are left in limbo since lawmakers failed to produce a General Fund budget for 2016. These services and the working poor families that need them must wait for their fate to be decided by lawmakers later this summer during a special legislative session.

“This is a pivotal time for child well-being in Alabama and state leaders must stay the course on investing in children and families. We cannot maintain these investments without addressing the state's budget challenges including passing a General Fund Budget that includes revenue enhancing measures. Without this step, Alabama will lose ground on improving child well-being and our children and families will suffer,” said Bridgeforth.

Additional areas where the state improved include a decrease in child and teen death rates and the teen birth rate.

The 2015 *Data Book* will be available July 21 at 12:01 a.m. EDT at www.aecf.org. Additional information is available at <http://databook.kidscount.org>, which also contains the most recent national, state and local data on hundreds of indicators of child well-being. The Data Center allows users to create rankings, maps and graphs for use in publications and on websites, and to view real-time information on mobile devices.

###

The Annie E. Casey Foundation creates a brighter future for the nation's children by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling communities into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow. For more information, visit www.aecf.org. KIDS COUNT® is a registered trademark of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

VOICES for Alabama's Children is a statewide nonprofit that works to ensure the well-being of Alabama's children through research, public awareness, and advocacy. For more information, see www.alvoices.org.