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## **Georgia Moves Up Two Spots to 40<sup>th</sup> in National Ranking of Child and Family Well-Being**

State continues to improve, but still lags behind the nation, presenting big challenges and opportunities



Georgia climbed two spots to 40th in an annual national ranking of child and family well-being that looks at health, education, economic well-being, and family and community. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation's 2015 *KIDS COUNT*<sup>®</sup> *Data Book*, more than one in four of Georgia's kids still lives in poverty, struggling to get the basic necessities they need to live healthy and productive lives. Kids who live in poverty lack access to healthy food, consistent medical care, and high-quality education. They're also more likely to be victims of abuse or neglect and to experience prolonged toxic stress, which can inhibit healthy brain development in young children.

Georgia continues to follow national trends, improving in both education and health indicators over the past five years, while showing mixed results in economic well-being, and in family and community strength.

"The bad news is that more than one in four kids in Georgia is living in poverty, which represents a significant increase from 2008, when the child poverty rate was one in five," said Rebecca Rice, Georgia KIDS COUNT coordinator. "There is good news, too, though. The number of children in poverty is actually lower than last year's, and that represents the first drop in child poverty in five years."

Another concern is that the number of children whose parents lack secure employment has also increased since 2008, but this rate has decreased since it peaked at 35 percent in 2011. The most recent data show that 33 percent of Georgia's kids—one in three—live in homes where neither parent has year-round, full-time employment.

"What is so troubling about employment in post-recession Georgia is that too many of the newly created jobs available pay low wages with benefits that fail to meet even basic family expenses," said Gaye Smith, executive director of Georgia Family Connection Partnership. "And the higher-paying jobs require a post-secondary degree, putting them out of reach for most of our adult population. That's why we in Georgia are investing heavily in quality early care and education efforts like [Quality Rated](#) and the [Get Georgia Reading Campaign](#) to prepare our kids to succeed in school and in work."

Georgia continues to see improvement in some key education indicators, but still faces challenges. In the past five years, students' math and reading proficiency has improved, but math proficiency still lags behind the national average. According to the latest numbers, two-thirds of Georgia fourth graders can't read proficiently, and more than two-thirds of eighth graders are not proficient in math. High-school

graduation has improved over the past five years as well, with the rate of students not graduating on time dropping from 35 percent in 2008 to 30 percent in the 2011–12 school year.

“The partnerships our private and public sectors have forged are taking us in the right direction,” said Smith. “But there is still significant work to do to ensure that all kids, families, and communities in Georgia are positioned to thrive.”

Georgia has seen a slight increase in the number of children not attending preschool in the past five years, reaching 52 percent, but this rate is better than the national average of 54 percent.

“The issue of child care hinges on two key issues for families—access and cost. First, there are not enough quality early childhood education programs available, because many communities lack licensed child-care centers and family care homes. And only 28 percent of Georgia’s centers and family homes were Quality Rated in 2014, limiting access to quality care,” said Rice. “But even when quality care is available, too many families simply can’t afford it. We can overcome these big challenges here in Georgia through sound policy choices.”

More Georgia kids are also growing up in homes where the head of the household lacks a high-school diploma. That matters because parental education plays a key role in a child’s economic, educational, and physical development. But even as parental educational attainment improves, the number of children growing up in single-parent families is on the rise, which presents challenges, because single-parent families struggle with fewer resources and tighter schedules than two-parent households.

In the health domain, Georgia has significantly improved in children without health insurance, now at 10 percent, and child and teen deaths, though the state still trails the national average on both indicators. Georgia’s rate of low-birthweight babies has held relatively steady over the past five years, with an approximate rate of 9.5 percent, but is higher than the national average of 8 percent.

“Even as our state celebrates some gains and the economy begins to show signs of life again, we need to acknowledge that not all of Georgia’s kids are equally sharing in the gains,” said Rice. “Kids of color are still more likely to grow up in poverty and be unprepared to begin school, and more likely to struggle in school once they’re there. To ensure that every child shares in the state’s success, we need to use a multi-generational approach to offer education and other opportunities to parents and children in Georgia’s most vulnerable families.”

“If we are to close the gaps and lift Georgia out of the bottom 10,” said Smith, “state and local government, nonprofits, and community and business leaders must continue to work together, and parents must step up, for the sake of our children—and for our great state.”

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For interactive statewide data, visit Georgia KIDS COUNT at [gafcp.org/kidscount](http://gafcp.org/kidscount).

**Georgia Family Connection Partnership** (GaFCP) is a public-private partnership created by the State of Georgia and funders from the private sector to assist communities in addressing the serious challenges facing children and families. GaFCP also serves as a resource to state agencies across Georgia that work to improve the conditions of children and families. Georgia KIDS COUNT provides policymakers and citizens with current data they need to make informed decisions regarding priorities, services, and resources that impact Georgia’s children, youth, families, and communities. Georgia KIDS COUNT is funded, in part, through a grant from **The Annie E. Casey Foundation**, a private charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States.

*The 2015 Data Book will be available July 21 at 12:01 a.m. EDT at [www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org). Additional information is available at <http://datacenter.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, <http://mobile.kidscount.org>. KIDS COUNT<sup>®</sup> is a registered trademark of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.*