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National *KIDS COUNT Data Book* Report Emphasizes Struggles of Low-Income Families

Findings for Illinois Closely Parallel Nationwide Trends

CHICAGO — Indicators of child well-being in Illinois show continuing challenges for low-income families in the aftermath of the Great Recession, according to the national *KIDS COUNT® Data Book*, published by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. More than 1.2 million Illinois children live in low-income families (families with incomes below 200% of poverty level). The *KIDS COUNT* data reveal some troubling trends related to family economic security:

Child poverty: The Illinois child poverty rate was 21 percent in 2013, up from 17 percent in 2008 and only slightly lower than its peak in 2011. These figures are consistent with national trends, which show that child poverty rates remain well above pre-recession levels. (In 2013, the official federal poverty level was about \$23,600 for a married couple with two children and \$18,800 for a single parent with two children.)

Racial-ethnic disparities in family economic well-being: The effects of the recession have been harshest for the most disadvantaged groups. Between 2008 and 2013, poverty rates in Illinois increased by 6 percentage points for Black children, 5 percentage points for Latino children, and 2 percentage points for White children.

Parental employment: In 2013, 30 percent of Illinois children lived with parents who lacked secure employment (working at least 35 hours per week, 50 weeks per year). This figure was only a slight improvement over 2010 (32%) and still substantially higher than the pre-recession level (26%).

Concentrated poverty: About 12 percent of Illinois children live in areas of concentrated poverty (communities where the overall poverty rate is 30% or more). Among African-American children, the proportion is much higher — 44 percent. Concentrated poverty is associated with harmful levels of family stress, higher crime rates, worse health outcomes, and limited job opportunities.

Illinois is close to the national average on most indicators in the *KIDS COUNT Data Book*, but we fare better than most states on children's health insurance coverage and participation in preschool.

Health care coverage: In 2013, only 4 percent of Illinois children lacked health insurance, compared with 7 percent nationwide. The state has also significantly narrowed racial-ethnic disparities in health insurance coverage. In 2013, the uninsured rate for Latino children in Illinois was only 5 percent, compared with 12 percent nationwide. These findings largely reflect the state's successful efforts over the past 15 years in expanding access to health care through Medicaid and related programs.

Preschool participation: In 2011-2013, 53 percent of 3- and 4-year-olds in Illinois attended preschool programs, compared with 46 percent nationwide. Preschool participation in Illinois was actually higher in 2007-2009; the subsequent decline reflects the erosion of state funding for preschool programs. Preschool participation rates continue to be much lower for Latino children (40%) than for either White children (58%) or Black children (56%).

Larry Joseph, director of research at Voices for Illinois Children, emphasized that the issues highlighted in the *KIDS COUNT Data Book* must be confronted with a comprehensive set of policy strategies. “There are no silver bullets. But a growing body of evidence identifies many policies and programs that are or can be effective in reducing disparities and expanding opportunities for children.”

Strengthening income and work supports: We must maintain and strengthen effective programs that enhance economic security low-income families — including the Earned Income Tax Credit at both the federal and state levels, the federally funded Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and the Illinois Child Care Assistance Program. Research has found that the federal EITC has positive long-term effects for children, including better health outcomes and improved academic achievement.

Improving educational opportunities: Nationwide data over several decades show a growing gap in academic achievement between the poorest and most affluent children. Extensive evidence demonstrates that high-quality preschool programs can produce significant gains in school readiness and academic success. Investments in early learning must be reinforced with resources to improve the quality of teaching and classroom experiences in public schools serving large numbers of children from low-income families.

Reducing health disparities: Expanding health insurance coverage for children is a major policy achievement, but there are still large disparities — related to family income and race-ethnicity — in access to services, quality of care, and health outcomes. Promoting healthy child development is a core objective of home visiting programs, which offer a broad range of intensive services and supports for at-risk families with young children or those expecting children. These programs can contribute to improved maternal and child health, enhanced social-emotional development, and future academic success.

According to the Casey Foundation report, efforts to expand opportunities for low-income families should also address issues affecting parents in the low-wage workforce. The report recommends policies that would promote higher wages, sick pay and family leave, flexible work schedules, and expanded unemployment benefits.

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The *KIDS COUNT Data Book*, published by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, features indicators of child well-being — for the 50 states and the nation — across four domains: economic well-being, education, health, and family and community. The Data Book is available at www.aecf.org. The KIDS COUNT Data Center (datacenter.kidscount.org), also a project of the Casey Foundation, contains more detailed data on hundreds of measures of child well-being. *KIDS COUNT*® is a registered trademark of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Voices for Illinois Children is a statewide, non-partisan advocacy organization that focuses on public policy issues affecting children and families. Voices’ Kids Count work is part of a nationwide network of state-level projects supported by the Casey Foundation. For the most recent Illinois Kids Count report, “Confronting Poverty, Creating Opportunity,” visit www.voices4kids.org.