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National *KIDS COUNT Data Book* Highlights Gains in Health, But One in Four Children Still Live in Poverty

Jeffersontown, KY – Kentucky ranks 34th in the nation in overall child well-being, according to the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s 2015 *KIDS COUNT® Data Book* co-released today by Kentucky Youth Advocates. The national *KIDS COUNT Data Book* provides state-level data and rankings. The 2015 *Kentucky KIDS COUNT County Data Book*, which includes county level data and rankings, will be released in November.

In addition to ranking 34th in overall child well-being, Kentucky ranks 32nd in Economic Well-Being, 30th in Education, 24th in Health, and 38th in Family and Community. While three of those four rankings are similar to those of the past two years (based on the same set of indicators), Kentucky’s health ranking continues to climb, from 31st in 2013 and 28th in 2014. Overall, Kentucky’s data trends mirror the data for the nation as a whole.

“Not surprisingly, the national *KIDS COUNT Data Book* shows that Kentucky should both take pride in progress made in certain areas around kids’ well-being and sense real challenges when it comes to other arenas,” said Dr. Terry Brooks, executive director, Kentucky Youth Advocates. “The track record reveals that we can make a difference in so many ways. In other words, supporting kids is never a question of capacity; it is a question of political will.”

Notable findings and recommendations in each domain of child well-being include:

Health: Kentucky’s highest ranking, and most significant gains for kids, appeared in children’s health.

The child and teen mortality rate fell by 24 percent from 2008 to 2013, and the percentages of low-



birthweight babies, children without health insurance, and teens abusing alcohol or drugs also showed improvement since 2008.

“Health may be a political hot potato for many reasons. However, when it comes to kids, the results are clear. Our health ranking stands as a beacon for tangible results for Kentucky kids,” said Brooks.

“Today’s children are born healthier and stay healthier because of access to quality care. The changed policies of late are working for kids in very tangible and in very powerful ways.”

The 24 percent decrease since 2008 in child and teen deaths—more than one-third of which are the result of accidental injuries—comes after the passage of graduated driver’s licensing in 2006 and strong booster seat legislation in 2008. Additional booster seat requirements passed this year will protect even more children from injury and death. The percentage of children without health insurance fell by 14 percent between 2008 and 2013. Kentucky is expected to make even more progress on this indicator over the next few years, as the data will reflect the effects of the state healthcare exchange, kynect, and expanded coverage to low-income parents through Medicaid. Research shows that when parents are covered, their children are more likely to be enrolled in coverage as well.

"The data show that KCHIP outreach efforts are paying off with most Kentucky children having insurance. With recent increases in health insurance access through kynect and Medicaid expansion, we expect to see even more children with coverage and able to receive health care. Kentucky has other opportunities to improve children's health. For example, comprehensive smoke-free policies will reduce pregnant women and children exposure to secondhand smoke. Reducing exposure to secondhand smoke for pregnant women and children should reduce pre-term and low-birthweight babies and negative health consequences in children, such as asthma," said Susan Zepeda, president and CEO of Foundation for a Healthy Kentucky.

Education: Though many more students are graduating on time from high school—only 18 percent fail to do so, a decrease of 31 percent between 2008 and 2012—the majority of 4th graders are still not reading at national proficiency standards, and the majority of 8th graders are not proficient in math. Also, the percentage of children not attending preschool has grown slightly since 2007-2009.

“I don’t think Kentucky educators have ever been working harder or doing more for kids,” said Brooks. “And yet, two aspects of this section of the report worry me. First, we cannot afford to celebrate the small improvements made when approximately two out of three Kentucky kids fail to meet national standards in reading and math. Secondly, we cannot afford a response to this data that is little more than ‘nibbling at the edges.’ We need a comprehensive and bold approach to reform. The good news is that there are so many ways to make significant improvements for student achievement. That means a much stronger linkage between schools and health supports; that means deepening the infrastructures for early childhood; that means a robust discussion about the current accountability and assessment system. In any case, we must do more than just tinker.”

“The innovative and persistent work of Kentucky’s educators is paying off in results for students,” said Tom Shelton, executive director of the Kentucky Association of School Superintendents. “If we want to take the next step ahead, the path is clear. We have to ensure strong early learning is a reality for every youngster. That means creating an environment in which children learn in every child care center and in every pre-school across Kentucky. I am especially intrigued by the collaborative power of school systems working with early childhood leaders; that can be a game changer.”

Family and Community: Kentucky has made progress in two important indicators in the family and community domain. Though it is still one of the highest in the nation, the teen birth rate continues to decrease, falling by 26 percent from 2008 to 2013. And only 12 percent of children now live in a family where the head of household lacks a high school diploma. The percent of children living in single-parent families has increased to 36 percent, however, and 16 percent of children live in high poverty areas (neighborhoods where more than 30 percent of people live in poverty). When poverty is concentrated, even children from higher income families face challenges.

“The data from this section reminds us that Kentucky’s families don’t fit into a conventional mode,” said Brooks. “Nontraditional families—whether that is a single parent or a grandparent raising their grandchildren—are becoming more and more the norm rather than the exception. In many ways, this is not just a Frankfort issue, but also an opportunity for local communities to make a positive difference for kids. Every community institution and player—principals and pediatricians; preachers and business leaders; dentists and nonprofit leaders; police and judges in our courts—has an obligation to re-think how they support families so that they can better serve youngsters.”

“In order to improve a child’s well-being, we must address the gaps in the parent’s well-being,” said Cathe Dykstra, president and CEO of Family Scholar House. “Without some level of post-secondary training, access to quality child care and secure employment, both the parent and the child will struggle. We believe that a two-generation approach is crucial.”

Economic Well-Being: The biggest problem facing Kentucky kids today continues to be poverty, as it impacts all other aspects of child well-being. Unlike many states, Kentucky has not yet rebounded from the recession, which means families are still struggling with basic living expenses.

“Here’s the bottom line from this year’s report. If we as a commonwealth want to get serious about improving the lives of our children, there is one overriding and persistent challenge: poverty. Over a quarter of a million of Kentucky’s kids live in poverty—that is one in four young people. Reducing poverty is the single most impactful way to improve overall child well-being. You can’t talk education or health without talking family economics. And we can begin to tackle persistent poverty only when economic well-being policy stops being political and starts being about the common good” said Brooks.

Broad solutions, such as advancing microenterprise opportunities, ensuring families have access to responsible lending and financial services, and a more integrated approach to benefits access would help families build up assets. Specific solutions for working families would have an immediate impact on the economic security of low-income families.

In addition to those kinds of supports, thoughtful and family-focused tax reform can make a difference. “A state refundable Earned Income Tax Credit would help more working parents close the gap between what they earn and what they need to make ends meet,” said Mike Hammons, director of advocacy for Children, Inc. “Expanding other supports to working families, like child care assistance, would benefit thousands of children across Kentucky and ensure parents have safe child care while they work.”

“On one hand, it is so easy to focus on problems and ignore wins. And yet this year’s report highlights areas of real progress for Kentucky’s kids,” Brooks said. “On the other hand, it is just as easy to hold up a couple areas of improvement and move on to another focus. We can’t do that because this report reminds us of how far we have to go before Kentucky is the best place in America to be young. The

political landscape in 2016 is ripe for making a difference for Kentucky's families and children through road-tested and bipartisan ideas that should be embraced by the new Governor, President Stivers, Speaker Stumbo, and especially by the good citizens of the Commonwealth."

The *KIDS COUNT Data Book* features the latest data on child well-being for every state, the District of Columbia and the nation and is available at www.aecf.org on July 21 at 12:01 a.m. EDT.

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Kentucky Youth Advocates believes all children deserve to be safe, healthy, and secure. As THE independent voice for Kentucky's children, we work to ensure policymakers create investments and policies that are good for children.

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.