



11001 Bluegrass Parkway
Suite 100
Jeffersontown, KY 40299

P. 502.895.8167
P. 502.895.8225

kyyouth.org

News Release:

Embargoed for release until:
12:01 a.m. EDT June 21, 2016

Contact:

Andrea Bennett
502-381-1176
abennett@kyyouth.org

**National 2016 *KIDS COUNT Data Book* Highlights Gains in Health Despite Challenging Economic Climate
Kentucky Ranks 35th in Child Well-being in the U.S.**

JEFFERSONTOWN, KY – Kentucky ranks 35th in the nation in overall child well-being, according to the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s 2016 *KIDS COUNT® Data Book* co-released today by Kentucky Youth Advocates. The national *KIDS COUNT Data Book* provides state-level data and rankings. The 2016 *Kentucky KIDS COUNT County Data Book*, which includes county-level data and rankings, will be released in November.

In addition to ranking 35th in overall child well-being, Kentucky ranks 38th in economic well-being, 27th in education, 16th in health, and 37th in the family and community domains. Notably, Kentucky’s health ranking continues to advance, from 28th in 2014 to 24th in 2015. Kentucky’s family and community ranking remains relatively steady, while its education ranking has risen slightly—but reflects mixed results, outlined below. The most significant ranking drop is in economic well-being, where trends continue to worsen. Overall, Kentucky’s data trends mirror trends for the nation as a whole.

“The real issue is not a drop or increase of one position, but rather that Kentucky continues to be in the bottom one-third of all states,” said Dr. Terry Brooks, executive director of Kentucky Youth Advocates. “Are we really content with the idea that two-thirds of America’s children are better off than Kentucky kids?”

Notable findings include gains in health but worsening trends in economic well-being

Health: The biggest news for Kentucky is the significant gains for kids within the health domain. The percent of children without health insurance fell by 43 percent from 2008 to 2014, bringing Kentucky’s rank to 10th in the nation for this indicator. The rate of child and teen deaths, the percent of low-birthweight babies, and the percent of teens abusing alcohol or drugs all showed improvement since 2008.

“Children’s health coverage continues to be a bright spot for Kentucky. This trend is not about the political fighting around health care at the federal or state level. Instead, it is about creative and bipartisan efforts to ensure that kids are covered. We can celebrate as a Commonwealth that only four percent of kids lack coverage and that we have surged ahead of other states to a top ten ranking,” said Brooks.

The 15 percent drop in the child and teen death rate since 2008 continues to show the outcomes of the passage of graduated driver’s licensing in 2006 and strong booster seat legislation in 2008, and we expect booster seat legislation passed in 2015 to carry on this progress. The trends show that Kentucky is keeping more kids safe from accidental death, though most child and teen deaths are still preventable.

“We are seeing better health outcomes for kids in Kentucky, and expanded health coverage and access to quality care play a vital role in making that happen,” said Dr. Susan Zepeda, president and CEO of the



Foundation for a Healthy Kentucky. “Families have been able to sign up for benefits online, streamlining the enrollment process. The decrease in kids without coverage may be due in part to expanded Medicaid coverage for low income adults that began in January 2014. Research shows that when parents have health coverage their children are more likely to also be signed up for health insurance.”

Education: Children and youth in Kentucky also show gains in education, but they still lag behind national standards. “It is time to challenge the blind optimism that permeates the K-12 establishment,” said Brooks. “Three out of five of our fourth graders fail to meet national proficiency standards in reading. Almost three out of four of our eighth graders fail to meet national proficiency standards in math.”

“Leaders in Kentucky must work together to address challenges along the cradle-to-career education pipeline. We must approach education with the goal of lifting up students in early childhood because over half of our three- and four-year-olds are not attending school and therefore not getting the head start they need to excel. Additionally, nearly one in five Kentucky high school students are not graduating on time, and when they are, are they ready for the next steps?” said Dr. Leon Mooneyhan, CEO of the Ohio Valley Educational Cooperative.

“Student performance should alarm parents and business leaders and jolt Kentucky leaders into making fundamental education reform a policy priority to ensure college and career readiness,” said Brooks.

Family and Community: Though Kentucky’s teen birth rate is still one of the highest in the nation, it fell by 34 percent from 2008 to 2014 and only 12 percent of children live in families where the head of the household lacks a high school diploma. Thirty-five percent of children now live in single-parent families. More and more children in Kentucky, 16 percent, are also living in high-poverty areas (neighborhoods where more than 30 percent of residents live in poverty). In these areas of concentrated poverty, all kids, even those from higher income families, face challenges.

“As families in Kentucky change, policy and practice must adapt,” said Brooks. “We have more nontraditional families, whether that’s a single-parent home or a relative raising kin. Local communities and Frankfort have a role to play in supporting these young people, as well as those raising them.”

“Families across the Commonwealth, especially in Eastern Kentucky, are struggling. We must build on the momentum of recent wins, like the increase in eligibility for the Child Care Assistance Program, by continuing support of low-income working families,” said Adrienne Bush, executive director of Hazard Perry County Community Ministries. “Children thrive when their parents are able to provide for them and parents thrive when they are able to get to work and know that their kids are safe and learning. Kentucky will thrive when policies that support the whole family—caregiver and child—are implemented. These policies are even more meaningful and effective in communities where poverty is concentrated, as in Appalachian Kentucky.”

Economic Well-being: Poverty remains the most persistent challenge for children in Kentucky. Today, more than one in four children in the Commonwealth lives below the poverty line. In fact, Kentucky’s child poverty rate has remained higher than it was pre-recession. Kentucky also ranks in the bottom 10 for the percent of kids living in families where neither parent has full-time, year-round employment. The good news, however, is that more young people are working or are in school. Only eight percent of Kentucky teens age 16 to 19 are not attending school or employed.

“More and more kids are living in poverty. And a third of Kentucky kids have parents without secure employment, which impacts housing and food security. Unless and until the leaders in the Commonwealth take common sense steps around that issue, the present and the future for Kentucky’s children are severely limited,” said Brooks.

Bipartisan solutions based on Kentucky values

“I look at this report card with concern but also with optimism. There are proven, pragmatic, and common ground ways we can move ahead,” said Brooks. “We as a state have quietly built a solid track record of bipartisan support for kid priorities and I expect that to continue.”

A number of solutions at the state and local levels could lead to better outcomes for all Kentucky families:

- The consistent improvements in child health coverage shows that improvements in access to care are a top need for Kentucky families. As health coverage continues to increase, expanding access to oral health care, particularly in rural areas, would immediately benefit children.
- School-based health centers would present opportunities for families to access medical, behavioral, and oral health care near their homes.
- Education reforms that invest in teacher leadership, spark innovation through public charter schools, and redefine the way we hold schools accountable would change the trajectory of student education.
- Working parents need safe and healthy child care options. Continuing to expand Child Care Assistance Program eligibility and reimbursement rates would promote workforce development and allow more low-income working parents to access quality child care.
- A state Earned Income Tax Credit would help lower-income working parents cover basic needs for their children while reinvesting money in their local economy.
- Focusing child welfare system investments in family preservation programs and reinstating the Kinship Care Program would better support caregivers and protect vulnerable children.

“Policy decisions are about commitment and priorities—not just about the dollars,” said Brooks. “That means leaders in Frankfort have to decide if they want Kentucky kids to languish in the bottom third in this country. Or will they come together on behalf of kids and continue that long, but achievable climb to make Kentucky the best place in America to be young?”

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 June 21 at 12:01 a.m. EDT.

###

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.