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**Montana “Most Improved” State in Child Well-Being Rankings
Health rankings improve but poverty persists**

MISSOULA, MONT. – Montana has seen the biggest improvement in state rankings of child well-being, moving up six spots from 30th to 24th among the 50 states, according to the 2016 national *KIDS COUNT*[®] *Data Book* from the [Annie. E. Casey Foundation](#), which focuses on key trends in child well-being in the post-recession years. The *Data Book* measures child well-being across four domains: economic well-being, education, health, and family and community.

This year’s *Data Book* notes improvements both in Montana and nationally, but the disturbing persistence of child poverty highlights the need for policies that advance two-generation solutions to provide opportunity for all children and families.

Montana’s overall ranking is the most improved

“Our rise in the rankings of child well-being reflects some real improvements for children in our state,” says Thale Dillon, director of Montana KIDS COUNT, “particularly in the area of children’s health.” In the health domain, Montana is ranked 39th, the state’s best ranking since the Annie E. Casey Foundation started its tracking. Driving this improvement are positive trends in three of the four health indicators that the *Data Book* has been documenting since 2009.

Since 2010, Montana’s child and teens death rate went down by 35 percent, improving the state’s ranking from 50th to 38th. “We’re interested in what is preventable,” says Dillon. “Year after year, the biggest causes of preventable child death are accidents, most notably motor vehicle crashes, and suicide.” As a result, Montana is continuing its efforts to increase seat belt use among all age groups, as well as implementing prevention programs focusing on suicide, as well as drug and alcohol abuse.

Mirroring national trends, Montana continues to see more children have insurance. State and federal programs have worked to move the percentage of uninsured children from 12 percent in 2010, to 8 percent in 2014. Nationally, about 6 percent of children do not have health insurance.

During the 2010/2011 school year, 10 percent of Montana teens ages 12 to 17 reported abusing alcohol or drugs. Each subsequent year, Montana has shown improvement in both

percent and ranking, with the rate dropping to 6 percent in 2013/2014 and ranking going from 50th to 35th. “Given everything we know about how drugs and alcohol impact the developing brain, this is encouraging news,” says Dillon. “Lower rates of addiction and abuse will improve not only short-term decision-making ability, but long-term cognitive abilities as well.”

Montana’s rank of 24th in the **education** domain results from a higher-than-average graduation rates of 85 percent, tempered by low-to-non-existing investment in high-quality early childhood education. The state’s lack of universal Pre-K is leaving approximately 15,000 Montana 3- and 4-year olds without access to high-quality early education, which strongly affects their school readiness and future chances at success.

In the **family and community** domain, Montana is ranked 15th based on indicators that trend in conflicting directions. The teen birth rate has continued its dramatic decline, nationally and in Montana, reaching a new all-time low of 26 per 1,000 women ages 15-19, although remaining the highest among affluent countries. As for the number of children living in high-poverty areas, Montana’s trend is basically flat at 7 percent over the last few years.

In the domain of **economic well-being**, Montana is ranked 19th with levels of persistent poverty that mirror national trends. Between 2009 and 2014, the percent of Montana children living in poverty went from 20 to 19 percent, currently equivalent to approximately 41,000 children. While there has been little change in the percentage of children in poverty, Montana’s rank has improved from 27th to 22nd, the result of other states falling further behind, causing Montana to move up.

Barriers to opportunity for low-income children and families

Despite declining unemployment numbers nationally, almost 1-in-3 of our country’s children still live in families where no member of the household has full-time, year-round employment, and almost 1-in-4 children live in poverty. Extensive research shows that growing up in a low-income family can have a profoundly negative impact on individuals; particularly for children under 5, poverty can impair health as well cognitive, social, and emotional development.

The report also notes that teens growing up today have fewer opportunities to move up the economic ladder compared to teens of their parents’ and grandparent’s generations—a historic first. A college degree is now required for most middle-income positions, but rising tuition costs and a shift in financial aid -- away from needs-based grants to loans -- has put a post-secondary education out of reach for most low-income students. Armed with only a high school degree, the future prospects for young adults are bleak.

“With rising higher education costs, stagnant wages and a flimsy social safety net, teens are less likely than their parents or grandparents to obtain economic security,” notes Patrick McCarthy, president and CEO of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. “For the sake of our economy and our society, we must reverse this trend to ensure that today’s youth – who will be the next generation of workers, parents and community leaders – have a successful transition to adulthood and beyond.”

Racial gaps in child well-being

Children of all races and income levels have experienced tremendous gains in well-being during recent decades. However, racially based inequities among children remain deep and stubbornly persistent. Our country’s legacy of racial inequity perpetuates the barriers to success faced by children of color. Nationally, African-American children are twice as likely as the average child to live in high-poverty neighborhoods, and to live in single-parent families. American Indian children are twice as likely to lack health insurance coverage, and Latino children are the least likely to live with a household head who has at least a high school diploma.

Solutions reflecting American values

Policies that ensure that all children are prepared for the future are a true reflection of core American values:

- 1) Provide OPPORTUNITY for American children by expanding access to high-quality Pre-K and early childhood services, to ensure that they are prepared to succeed in school;
- 2) Enable low-income workers to take RESPONSIBILITY for their families by enacting a refundable state Earned Income Tax Credit; and
- 3) Ensure SECURITY for American families, particularly those with young children, by providing paid family leave to aid in balancing obligations at work and home.

The 2016 *Data Book* will be available June 21 at 12:01 a.m. EDT at 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.

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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. KIDS COUNT® is a registered trademark of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. For more information, visit www.aecf.org.



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Montana KIDS COUNT's mission is to improve child and family wellbeing in our state, by disseminating data and research that will advance awareness of challenges and opportunities. We make this information available to child advocates, policy makers, and Montana citizens to encourage informed and responsible decision-making.