



Promoting public policy that enhances the lives of children and youth in Vermont

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Vermont's drop in child-well being ranking signals opportunity for targeted policy action

MONTPELIER, Vt.— The 2016 *KIDS COUNT*® *Data Book*, a state-by-state index of the well-being of America's children, ranks Vermont 6th in the nation for overall child well-being. Vermont's ranking has fallen in recent years; in 2013 and 2014 the state was ranked 2nd but in 2015 it fell to 5th place.

The *Data Book* determines a state's overall ranking by analyzing data based on sixteen indicators that are then grouped into four domains. Vermont's placement varies across these domains: the state holds 10th position in both economic well-being and health; fifth in education; and third in family and community.

For the second year in a row, a non-New England state ranks number one for overall child well-being. Minnesota holds the top spot, followed by Massachusetts, Iowa, New Hampshire and Connecticut—a newcomer to the top five. Mississippi remains the lowest ranked, with New Mexico, Louisiana, Nevada and Alabama rounding out the bottom five.

“What would it look like for Vermont to be number one? For each indicator we could make manageable improvements, which would move us significantly in this index,” says Sarah Teel, research director at Voices for Vermont's Children. She says that bringing 3,500 children out of poverty (there are approximately 19,000 kids in poverty in Vermont) would result in the lowest child poverty rate in the country. She says an improved ranking is not the end goal, however; eliminating children's experience of poverty is.

In 2007, Vermont set a goal to cut the child poverty rate in half by 2017. So far, the percent of children in poverty has increased instead. In 2014, 16 percent of Vermont children were in poverty; this is 23 percent higher than in 2008 and slightly higher than the 15 percent that held steady from 2011-2013.

“The poverty rate is a measure of how much people are earning in wages from employment. Access to secure jobs with adequate wage levels would have a direct impact on this indicator,”

says Teel. She points out that an index like the *Data Book* is helpful to focus attention on real, numerical goals, but the real payoff would be drastic improvements in the lives of kids and in the well-being of entire communities. Many households aren't below the poverty line, but financial struggle is ubiquitous. "Official poverty is just one segment of the broader and worsening situation of economic inequality," Teel says.

"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," said Patrick McCarthy, president and CEO of the 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."

The national report shows that many indicators, aided by federal and state policies, are positive for youth despite economic challenges. In Vermont, the children's health insurance program – Dr. Dynasaur – which insures half of all kids in Vermont, has contributed to a reduction in the percentage of children without health insurance to only 2 percent - the lowest rate in the country. Making sure an additional 2,600 kids were covered would reduce the uninsured rate to zero.

Another indicator that presents an opportunity for a big impact is the percent of teens age 16-19 in Vermont who are not in school and not working. Providing avenues to re-engagement for just 200 youth in Vermont could result in the lowest percent in the nation – expand that to 1,600 teens and the percent of disengaged youth in Vermont would be zero as well.

In 2014, 32 percent of kids lived in households that spent more than 30 percent of their income on housing, down from 37 percent in 2008. This is a statistically significant improvement, but only moves Vermont from 29th in the nation to 23rd. Households with housing costs exceeding 30 percent of their income are considered "housing-cost burdened" and are more likely to experience unstable and inadequate housing, as well as limitations on access to other necessities like food, health care, childcare and utilities.

"What's critical is our responsiveness to the realities we see in this data. If we see a high poverty rate, we would expect and hope to also see increased use of safety net programs, like 3Squares VT, Reach up and Medicaid to help meet the needs of kids," said Teel. "Even though the economy isn't always supportive, we can build a state that works for everyone, including our most vulnerable kids."

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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Voices for Vermont's Children is a statewide, multi-issue, independent non-profit that promotes public policy to enhance the lives of children and youth in Vermont. For more information, visit www.voicesforvtkids.org. Follow Voices for Vermont's Children on Twitter @voices4vtkids and on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/Voices-for-Vermonts-Children-284376947744>.

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