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Casey Foundation to Policymakers: Don't Backtrack on Gains for U.S. Children

2017 KIDS COUNT® Data Book shows improvement, but 10 million children living in high-poverty areas are at risk; lawmakers urged to invest in what works for kids

BALTIMORE — The Annie E. Casey Foundation urged state and federal policymakers not to back away from targeted investments that are proving to help U.S. children become healthier, more likely to complete high school and better positioned to contribute to the nation's economy as adults. Foundation President and CEO Patrick McCarthy called on leaders to continue investing in families as Casey released the *2017 KIDS COUNT Data Book*, which shows steady improvements in several areas of child well-being.

In recent years, government policies have helped drive positive outcomes for children and families nationwide and in several states. Ninety-five percent of U.S. children now have health care coverage, a historic high, due to the combination of key provisions of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and expansions to Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). California, home to one in eight of the nation's children, saw a 67 percent decline in the number of uninsured children between 2010 and 2015, the biggest improvement over that period. Colorado, Minnesota, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, Oregon and South Carolina also saw declines of uninsured children of more than 50 percent.

With the support of policies such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and the Child Tax Credit, fewer children overall live in poverty, more parents have jobs and more families are able to bear the cost of housing. Additionally, a national, all-time high of 83 percent of students completed high school on time.

"Eight years after the most devastating recession of our lifetime, we are pleased to see some positive trends in many areas of child well-being," McCarthy said. "As policymakers search for ideas to expand the economy and bring economic opportunity to families, I urge them not to abandon targeted public investments that are helping more people lift themselves out of poverty and gain access to health care."

Key Findings from the 2017 KIDS COUNT Data Book:

Economic incentives produced slight gains for families

Tax credits and more job opportunities have helped pave the path out of poverty for families in the United States and show promise for helping to further increase mobility. The *Data Book* shows that more parents are employed, fewer families are living with a significant housing cost burden and fewer children are living in poverty. Nationally, the percentage of children in families living below the federal poverty line fell slightly, from 22 percent in 2010 to 21 percent in 2015. In 2015, the year of our most recent data, the nation's unemployment rate was 5.3 percent, but has since declined to 4.5 percent. The EITC has buoyed many low-income families.

More families living in high-poverty neighborhoods, minimal gains in education

Despite the progress, there are areas of concern. For example, the rise of children living in high-poverty areas over the past decade is persistent. From 2011 to 2015, 14 percent of children lived in areas where poverty rates were at or above 30 percent. Poverty has a stranglehold on parts of the United States, especially in the South and Southwest, where children face economic, health and academic challenges with few policies and investments to mitigate them. The four states that had 20 percent or more of their children living in high-poverty areas — Arizona, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico— are in the southern and southwest United States. In the District of Columbia, 25 percent of children reside in high-poverty neighborhoods. Eighty-four percent of children in Puerto Rico live in high-poverty areas.

“The U.S. continues to have one of the highest child poverty rates among all developed countries,” said Laura Speer, associate director of policy reform and advocacy for the Annie E. Casey Foundation. “This unfairly burdens our young people and the nation, costing an estimated \$500 billion a year in reduced economic opportunities and increased health and criminal justice-related costs.”

And, despite the rise in high school completion rates, academic gains among children fell. Sixty-eight percent of eighth graders scored below proficient in math in 2015, up from 2009. Nearly two in three students in fourth grade lack reading proficiency. Attendance for prekindergarten programs for 3- and 4-year-olds remains stagnant, with 53 percent not accessing these beneficial services.

The *2017 Data Book* focuses on key trends in the post-recession years, measuring child well-being in four domains: economic, education, health and family and community.

State Rankings in the 2017 KIDS COUNT Data Book

Three New England states ranked among the top five in the United States for overall child well-being — New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Vermont — followed by Minnesota and Iowa. States in the South and Southwest ranked at the bottom: Mississippi is the lowest-ranked state, followed by New Mexico, Louisiana, Nevada and Arizona.

- Three heartland states were among the top five in economic well-being — North Dakota, Minnesota and Iowa — along with New Hampshire and Utah.
- California ranks among the bottom five states in economic well-being, a disconcerting fact given that nine million children — or one in eight of all U.S. children — live in the state.

Data-driven investments and policies are key for promising futures

“We must use reliable data to inform policy decisions that ease poverty and create the next generation of healthier and better-educated citizens,” said McCarthy. “We call on policymakers to use this evidence to continue and expand what’s working, and to find additional solutions that make a measurable difference for children.”

The Casey Foundation offered the following recommendations to ensure all children can reach their full potential:

- **HEALTH — Maintain health care programs.** Reaching 95 percent of U.S. children with health insurance is a tremendous achievement that should not be jeopardized. Provide continued investments at the federal and state levels. Remove systemic barriers that prevent families from enrolling their children in health coverage programs.
- **EDUCATION — Invest in early childhood education programs.** Science has taught us that the first few years of development can position a child for success in school and life. Supporting early childhood education opportunities at the local, state and federal levels enables children to reach critical milestones that lead to lifetime success.
- **ECONOMIC — Expand programs that create economic stability for families.** The EITC, at the federal level and in many states, has become a cornerstone in helping low-income families meet basic needs. Offering tax breaks for child care can help working parents better balance their financial responsibilities.

Release Information

The *2017 KIDS COUNT Data Book* will be available June 13 at 12:01 a.m. EDT at www.aecf.org. Additional information is available at www.aecf.org/databook, which also contains the most recent national, state and local data on hundreds of indicators of child well-being. Journalists interested in creating maps, graphs and rankings in stories about the *Data Book* can use the KIDS COUNT Data Center at datacenter.kidscount.org.

About the Annie E. Casey Foundation

The Annie E. Casey Foundation creates a brighter future for the nation's children by developing solution 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.