

UNDER EMBARGO until Wednesday, June 27, 12:01 a.m. EDT

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Fewer Montana Children Live in Poverty But underfunded census is a threat for accurate accounting and investment

MISSOULA, Montana — More Montana children have health insurance and fewer kids are living in poverty as the state ranks 23rd nationally for overall child well-being, according to the *2018 KIDS COUNT® Data Book*, released today by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. In 2010, 20 percent of Montana children lived in poverty, whereas in 2016, that number had dropped to 15 percent, which boosted Montana's national ranking in this area from 27th to 16th, with Montana gains outpacing national averages.

Another bright spot for Montana children highlighted in this year's *Data Book* is the continued improvement in the number of Montana children who have health insurance. This indicator saw Montana's biggest jump in the national rankings, from 45th to 33rd. The drop from 12 percent of children being uninsured in 2010 to 5 percent in 2016 means 17,000 fewer Montana children are without health insurance.

Bryce Ward, director of health care research at the Bureau of Business and Economic Research, notes that the decline in the number of uninsured children "likely reflects the continued momentum of the Affordable Care Act, in particular the fact that Montana expanded Medicaid in 2016. Parents getting insured through Medicaid expansion likely led to more kids getting insurance as well." Federal funding for Medicaid expansion and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) is uncertain, "putting these gains at risk."

Also of note is the continued improvement in the teen birth rate in Montana. The rate has dropped every year since 2010, from 35 births per 1,000 females ages 15 to 19 to 24 births per 1,000 in 2016. These gains underscore the effectiveness of existing teen pregnancy prevention programs and the importance of continued investment in evidence-based pregnancy prevention programs. Such programs improve both short- and long-term outcomes for children and families.

The annual *KIDS COUNT Data Book* uses 16 indicators to rank each state across four domains — economic well-being, health, education and family and community — measuring the status of child well-being at the state and national levels. Montana ranks:

- **17th in economic well-being.** Montana saw gains in all four economic well-being indicators, from 2010-2016. The most notable gain in economic well-being is the decrease in the percentage of children living in poverty. Montana is ranked 10th for the percentage of children in households that spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing, the state's highest ranking indicator in this domain.
- **46th in health.** The health domain finds Montana near the bottom of the national rankings. With a 40th ranking, Montana still struggles with high death rates for children and youth; investment in evidence-based programs that prevent suicide and as well as programs improving vehicle safety are proven to save lives. Montana ranks 42nd for the percentage of teens who abuse alcohol and drugs. As noted earlier, the ranking for children without health insurance improved to 33rd but

continued investment and focus is essential as we are still below national averages. The percentage of babies who are born at low birthweight has remained virtually unchanged since 2010.

- **20th in education.** Montana slipped from 17th to 20th in education, primarily because of a decrease in eighth-grade math proficiency. In 2017, 63 percent of eighth-graders scored below proficient in math, compared to 54 percent in 2011. It's not clear what's driving this trend. The percentage of high school students not graduating on time has remained flat since the previous year's *Data Book*, while there have been modest gains in both the percentage of children ages 3 and 4 not attending preschool, and the percentage of fourth-graders who scored below proficient in reading.
- **10th in family and community.** Montana has the lowest rate in the nation for the percentage of children in families where the head of household lacks a high school diploma, a trend that follows improvements in graduation rates. Further, Montana ranks second for the low percentage of children in single parent families, meaning Montana children are more likely to live in families with two incomes. Teen birth rates have been dropping, while the percentage of children who live in high-poverty areas has increased.

The Annie E Casey Foundation publishes the annual *Data Book* to inform policymakers, child advocates and the general public about the status of child well-being in each state. Thale Dillon, the director of Montana KIDS COUNT, notes that quality data collection, such as the census, is “fundamental to understanding what challenges children and families face, what programs are effective, and whether or not our tax dollars are being invested where they are needed.”

However, the U.S. Census Bureau has been underfunded for several years, making it more difficult for the agency to carry out its mission of determining an accurate count of all people living in the United States, as required by the Constitution. The Founding Fathers conceived of this accounting as essential to the functioning of our democracy, as it determines political representation and legislative districts. Today, the data collected by the Census Bureau every 10 years are used in ways that are equally crucial for this country, including the allocation of federal funds and local planning for schools and hospitals.

As it stands, budget cuts have left out certain communities, resulting in an “undercount” of these populations. In Montana, about 12 percent, or 8,000, children under age 5 live in hard-to-count census tracts, which include rural areas and tribal communities. To make up for budget shortfalls, the 2020 census will increase the use of the internet for data collection, causing areas with limited internet access to be even more likely to be missed in the count. An inaccurate count “has serious repercussions for Montana children,” warns Dillon, “as undercounted communities do not receive the needed share of public funds for things like schools, hospitals and child care programs.”

Release Information

The 2018 KIDS COUNT® *Data Book* with state-by-state rankings and supplemental data will be available June 27 at 12:01 a.m. ET and can be viewed at www.aecf.org/databook at that time. Users can download the complete *Data Book* and access hundreds of other measures of child well-being by visiting the KIDS COUNT Data Center at www.datacenter.kidscount.org.



About Montana KIDS COUNT

Montana KIDS COUNT's mission is to improve child and family well-being in our state by disseminating data and research that will advance awareness of challenges and opportunities. We make this information available to child advocates, policymakers and Montana citizens to encourage informed and responsible decision-making, as good data make for better policies. Montana KIDS COUNT is a national and state-by-state project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation to track the state of children in the United States.

About the Annie E. Casey Foundation

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.