



## **UNDER EMBARGO until Monday June 17, 12:01 a.m. ET**

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### **Progress for Wisconsin's Children at a Standstill**

**MADISON, Wisconsin** — Wisconsin's rank of 13th in the annual *KIDS COUNT*® *Data Book* signals troubling trends in child well-being over the past 30 years. Some of the indicators have not merely stalled but have gotten worse, and the high ranking masks significant racial and ethnic disparities within the four domains assessed annually: health, education, economic well-being and family and community.

The first *KIDS COUNT Data Book*, published in 1990, represented an innovative idea to use data as a catalyst to advance state policies toward improving the lives of children and families. Thirty years later, KIDS COUNT and the Annie E. Casey Foundation have documented areas of significant progress. Nationally, and in Wisconsin, rates of teen pregnancy and child and teen deaths have dramatically reduced, while percentages of children attending preschool have increased — all very important factors for healthy children and families. Yet, in other areas, progress has stalled or regressed.

For example, there remains an urgent need for policymakers to address the unacceptable levels of reading and math proficiency among the nation's students, and child poverty has not relented, and it is increasingly concentrated. "The data contained in this year's *Data Book* demonstrate that positive change can be made through targeted policy approaches, while simultaneously demanding that we do better both as a nation and as a state," said Erica Nelson, project director of Wisconsin Kids Count and Race to Equity. "The information in this year's report reinforces that we must act with urgency to expand Medicaid, combat persistent child poverty, and improve reading and math proficiency as well as high school graduation rates, all with a particular focus on those furthest from opportunity: low-income families of color. By embracing these challenges we can build a strong future for the state of Wisconsin."

Aligning with national trends, Wisconsin has improved on several key indicators. The percentage of Wisconsin children in families with heavy housing cost burdens decreased from 36 percent in 2010 to 23 percent in 2017. The percentage of Wisconsin children in families where no parent has full-time, year-round employment has also decreased, (from 30 percent to 22 percent). Fewer Wisconsin teens now face challenges to their education and entry into the workforce due to teen pregnancy, with the birth rate decreasing from 26 births per 1,000 girls aged 15 - 19 to 14 births per 1,000 in 2017.

Unfortunately, however, improvement has stalled on a number of important indicators of child well-being in Wisconsin. The percentage of children without health insurance in the state has barely changed since 2010. Wisconsin used to be a top-five state on this indicator. It is now ranked 18th. States implementing Medicaid expansion have surpassed Wisconsin by providing a stronger, healthier start for their youth.

Equally shocking is Wisconsin's fall from its reputation as a strong education state. Nearly two-thirds of Wisconsin fourth graders don't read at grade level, and more than half of eighth graders are not at grade level in math. In the context of even worse national trends, Wisconsin's rank of 15th in education overall, and 30th in fourth-grade reading proficiency indicates widespread failure to value educational preparation for the children of our state and nation.

Notably, when these same child well-being indicators are disaggregated by race and ethnicity, it paints an even more shameful picture of the state of Wisconsin. Children of color are continuing to experience higher barriers to health and success. African-American children in Wisconsin often experience more severe outcomes, compared to both white children and other children of color (for whom we have data). Outcomes for Native-American children in Wisconsin are frequently not available. Redress for the historic marginalization of Wisconsin's tribal communities starts with understanding and correcting the impacts of systemic oppression on the health and well-being of Native-American children. It requires investing in indigenous-led, data-supported advocacy.

Although child poverty rates have decreased slightly since 2010 for most racial and ethnic groups, more work is needed. In Wisconsin, 36 percent of African-American children live in poverty, which is four times the rate for white children. Twenty-seven percent of Latinx children live in poverty, three times the rate for white children.

There has been a significant drop in the percentage of children living in households with high housing burdens — spending more than 30 percent of their income on housing. However, more than half of Wisconsin's African-American children were living in households with a high housing burden in 2017, as are more than one-third of Wisconsin's Latinx children. These rates are, respectively, triple and double that rate for white children.

Though high school graduation is one of Wisconsin's highest-ranked indicators, troubling news remains for our youth. While only 7 percent of white students in Wisconsin did not graduate on time for the 2016-17 school year, 20 percent of Latinx students, 21 percent of Native-American students, and 33 percent of African-American students did not graduate on time. Wisconsin's educational achievement gaps have been shown to result from complex systemic challenges and adverse policies. Every child deserves an educational system that enables them to learn and thrive.

Success for every child in Wisconsin is all the more important given its recent demographic changes. Between 1990 and 2017, the state experienced a 2 percent decrease in child population (compared to a 15 percent increase nationwide). Wisconsin's additional demographic changes over the last three decades mirror the rest of the nation — increasing racial and ethnic diversity. Wisconsin's percentage of children of color doubled from 13.5 percent to 27.4 percent during this time. In a state with a shrinking child population, an aging overall population, and industries with global economic interests, Wisconsin must embrace and invest in the success of its diverse youth.

Every Wisconsin child is a contributor to the future of Wisconsin. If we continue to allow the well-being of our children to stall — or worse yet, decline — we will cede our future to other states. States that invest in an upward trajectory for their youth will reap the economic and social benefits of preparing for their future.

For the sake of our children and our future, Kids Forward calls on our elected officials to:

- *Provide tools proven to help families thrive economically.* This includes providing tax relief for low-income households by increasing the state Earned Income Tax Credit for families, and reversing the negative changes to Wisconsin Works (W-2) and other public assistance.
- *Expand the programs that make and keep kids and families healthy.* Wisconsin should expand Badger Care, support the proposed Healthy Women, Healthy Babies Initiative, and support programs that reduce the risk of lead poisoning.
- *Support efforts to improve education.* This includes improved base funding for education, significant increases in special education services, more support for mental health, school safety, and bilingual services, and expanding access to high-quality, affordable early education.
- *Count all kids.* Ensure that the 2020 census counts all children, especially those under 5 years old and those from hard-to-count communities.
- *Target racial and ethnic disparities.* Correct the systemic issues surrounding programs and policies that create and perpetuate disparate outcomes for Wisconsin's children of color. Wisconsin's KIDS COUNT rankings mask the reality that black and brown children face a greater number of obstacles in every area of well-being.

We must continue to invest in children and believe in a future that is data-informed, thriving, diverse, and inclusive. With Wisconsin's legislative budget session in focus, now is the time to examine indicators of child and family well-being. Now is the time to ensure that state investments deliver what children need to reach their full potential, particularly children of color and those furthest from opportunity.

### **Release Information**

The 2019 KIDS COUNT® Data Book will be available June 17 at 12:01 a.m. ET at <http://www.aecf.org>. Additional information is available at <http://www.aecf.org/databook>. 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](http://datacenter.kidscount.org).

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### **About Kids Forward**

Kids Forward advocates for effective, long-lasting solutions that break down barriers to success for children and families in Wisconsin. Using research and a community-informed approach, Kids Forward works to help every kid, every family, and every community thrive.

### **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](http://www.aecf.org).