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West Virginia Ranks 43rd Nationally in Well-Being of Children

State sees improvements in child health and family and community context, but potential undercount in 2020 census jeopardizes progress

CHARLESTON, West Virginia — West Virginia has seen gains in three of four indicators of child well-being used to track children’s health as well as three of four family and community indicators, according to the *2019 KIDS COUNT® Data Book* released today by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

The improvements reveal the benefits of investing in programs and resources that work to provide children with the supports they need to progress and thrive. However, with a potential undercount of about a quarter of West Virginia’s youngest children in the upcoming 2020 census, the same programs that have been able to help children make some progress in West Virginia may be in jeopardy of losing federal funding.

The annual *Data Book* uses 16 indicators to rank each state across four domains — health, education, economic well-being and family and community — as an assessment of child well-being. This year’s report reveals some important truths about the state of child well-being, some more positive than others. Among the good news is that West Virginia has one of the lowest rates (3 percent) of uninsured children in the country, ranking sixth in that indicator. Since having insurance provides the foundation for accessing health care and improving health outcomes, this represents an important health-policy victory.

Unfortunately, providing children with insurance alone is not enough to improve health outcomes in the state. It’s up to policymakers and advocates to ensure that barriers to receiving care are reduced. Health outcomes are strongly connected to other childhood indicators, such as education and economic stability.

West Virginia ranks 43rd in education. While the state has seen improvements in both reading and math proficiency for students, it is still well below the national averages, with 68 percent of West Virginia fourth-graders not proficient in reading and 76 percent of eighth-graders not proficient in math. The national averages for proficiency are 65 and 67 percent respectively.

Considering the well-known link between education and future well-being, this represents an important area for improvement in West Virginia.

Similarly, children who grow up in financially stable environments have better outcomes in the long run. With just over a quarter of West Virginia's children living in families with incomes below the federal poverty level, one of the highest rates in the country, decision makers need to support programs that connect parents to economic opportunities. West Virginia ranks 48th in overall economic well-being for children, dropping one spot from its ranking of 47 in the 2018 *Data Book*.

Decade of Damage Possible from Inaccurate Census

Even as West Virginia is seeing some improvements, the prospect of an undercount of the state's young children is concerning.

Approximately 26 percent of West Virginia's young children (under the age of 5) live in hard-to-count areas in the state, putting them at risk of being undercounted in the 2020 census. These are children living in rural areas, multi-dwelling homes and other areas throughout the state. In addition, children of color, those living in immigrant families and low-income children are disproportionately undercounted. If missed in the national count, these children and the communities where they live stand to suffer the most if vital programs face reductions in funding.

An undercount of young children in the upcoming decennial census would shortchange child well-being over the next decade by putting at risk hundreds of millions of dollars of federal funding for programs that are critical to family stability and opportunity. Roughly 55 major federal programs, including Head Start and the Children's Health Insurance Program, allocate more than \$880 billion a year based on census data.

"Our priority is to ensure that every kid counts in West Virginia," said WV KIDS COUNT Executive Director Tricia Kingery. "An undercount would result in less funding for education, lower access to health care for children and fewer vital supports for working parents to ensure the economic stability of their family."

Release Information

The 2019 KIDS COUNT® *Data Book* will be available June 17 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 WV KIDS COUNT

WV KIDS COUNT is the leading resource for data on child and family well-being in the state. We are a member of the national KIDS COUNT Network, and receive funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, as well as state-level foundations, government grants, corporations and individuals.

WV KIDS COUNT is a private, nonprofit, non-partisan organization celebrating our 30th year anniversary this year. The 2017 WV county level data for child well-being is available on the WV KIDS COUNT website at: <http://wvkidscount.org>

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.