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Oregon's Progress on Child and Family Well-Being Imperiled by Pandemic

Data Across 50 States Show Pre-Pandemic Progress at Risk, Smart Policy and Investments Can Strengthen Recovery, Annie E. Casey Foundation Finds

Portland, Oregon — Prior to the pandemic, Oregon's support for children and families showed uneven improvement. While Oregon was performing well on improving the rate of high school students graduating on time, it fell short on meaningfully improving the percentage of fourth graders proficient in reading, according to the **2021 KIDS COUNT® Data Book**, a 50-state report of recent household data developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation analyzing how families have fared between the Great Recession and the COVID-19 crisis. Additionally, the *Data Book* shows that increasing support for children and families is essential to address persistent racial and ethnic gaps and to ensure all children can thrive.

This year's *Data Book* shows nearly a decade of progress could be erased by the COVID-19 pandemic unless policymakers act boldly to sustain the beginnings of a recovery from the coronavirus crisis.

In Oregon in 2019, one in five high school students (20%) failed to graduate from high school on time, a rate that has improved for seven straight years. Despite the progress, Oregon remains one of the lowest ranked states (46th) in the nation for on-time graduation rates. Two in three (66%) Oregon fourth graders were not proficient in reading in 2019, matching the national average. This rate has shown minimal, albeit not meaningful, improvement over the past decade, declining 4%.

Among the findings are reasons for Oregonians to celebrate too. For instance, the rate of births to teenage mothers (ages 15 to 19) has been on the decline since 2010, mirroring national trends. Between 2010 and 2019, the rate of births to teenage mothers has decreased by 57% from 2.8% to 1.2%. Also showing improvement was the child and teen death rate which in 2019 stood at 186 deaths per 100,000 children and teens, down from a 10-year high of 237 deaths in 2017.

"It is important that we act with urgency for the future of our children and youth," said Jenifer Wagley, executive director of Our Children Oregon. "The health of our communities is intrinsically linked to the choices we make now. We have the choice to replicate and strengthen public policy that will improve the common good. Now is the time to invest in equitable and impactful programs and policy that will pave a path for recovery from the pandemic where all children and their families can thrive."

The annual *Data Book* assesses child well-being using 16 indicators that measure four domains — economic well-being, education, health, and family and community. These indicators represent the most recent information available but do not capture the impact of the past year:

- **ECONOMIC WELL-BEING:** In 2019, 110,000 Oregon children lived in households with an income below the poverty line. The pandemic has brought on new challenges and compounded existing economic hardships for many families.
- **EDUCATION:** In 2017–19, 52,000 3- and 4-year-olds in Oregon were not in school. This number has remained consistent the past three years and equates to nearly five in nine (54%) young children not in school. The passage of the Student Success Act in 2019 and Universal Preschool in Multnomah County this past fall are first steps to address these rates.
- **AFFORDABLE HEALTH CARE:** In 2019, 38,000 children did not have health insurance. Over the past decade, the percentage of children without health insurance saw a steep decrease of 56% from 9% in 2010 to 4% in 2019. In 2017, legislation known as ‘Cover All Kids’ was enacted in Oregon, increasing health care coverage to all children up to 300% of the federal poverty level.
- **FAMILY AND COMMUNITY:** In 2015-19, 34,000 children lived in high poverty areas in Oregon, a remarkable 58% decline from a high of 80,000 children in 2011-15. High poverty areas pose a risk to healthy child development and are defined as an area where 30% or more of the population live in poverty. Declining poverty rates and low unemployment before the pandemic likely contributed to these improved outcomes; this progress is threatened by the pandemic’s impacts.

Survey data, first highlighted by the Foundation last December, were updated to add to the story of Oregon’s children and families amidst the pandemic. Between April and December 2020, one in 10 adults in Oregon with children in the household (10%) lacked health insurance. By March 2021, this figure fell to 7%, suggesting the beginnings of recovery. While this indicator and others suggest signs of recovery for the state and the nation, this burgeoning recovery appears uneven. While both non-Hispanic white families and Hispanic or Latino families saw improvement in health insurance coverage in March 2021, when it came to having confidence in making next month’s rent or mortgage payment or sometimes or often not having enough food to eat in the past two weeks, figures had dramatically worsened for Hispanic or Latino families (48%) from those reported in April–December of 2020 (28%).

“The COVID-19 pandemic is the most extraordinary crisis to hit families in decades,” said Lisa Hamilton, president and CEO of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. “Deliberate policy decisions can help them recover, and we’re already seeing the beginnings of that. Policymakers should use this moment to repair the damage the pandemic has caused — and to address long-standing inequities it has exacerbated.”

Investing in children, families and communities is a priority to ensure an equitable and expansive recovery. Several of the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s policy suggestions have already been enacted in the American Rescue Plan, and additional recommendations include:

- **Congress should make the expansion of the child tax credit permanent.** The child tax credit has long had bipartisan support, so lawmakers should find common cause and ensure the largest one-year drop ever in child poverty is not followed by a surge.

- **State and local governments should prioritize the recovery of hard-hit communities of color.** Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color have faced disproportionate levels of hardship amidst the pandemic, largely due to systemic and institutional barriers further exacerbated by the pandemic.
- **States should expand income support that helps families care for their children.** Permanently extending unemployment insurance eligibility to contract, gig and other workers and expanding state tax credits would benefit parents and children.
- **States that have not done so should expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act.** The American Rescue Plan offers incentives to do so.
- **States should strengthen public schools and pathways to postsecondary education and training.** Robust investments for school-aged children and transition-aged youth could result in substantial socio-economic benefits for youth, families and communities in the future.

Release Information

The *2021 KIDS COUNT® Data Book* will be available June 21 at 12:01 a.m. EDT at www.aecf.org. Additional information is available at 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.

About Our Children Oregon

Our Children Oregon is a statewide advocacy organization for children and youth whose mission is to be a voice and force for the common good for all Oregon children, ensuring all children have the resources and opportunities they need to reach their full potential. Our Children Oregon is part of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's network of KIDS COUNT state organizations.

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.

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