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Contact: Richard Kennedy | Richard.Kennedy@tn.gov | 615-532-1570

Tennessee Ranks in the Bottom Half for Child Well-Being Nationally

Data Across 50 States Show Struggles with Tennessee Child Well-Being Prior to Pandemic, But Hopes for Recovery Remain, Annie E. Casey Foundation Finds

NASHVILLE —Tennessee was performing well on high school graduation rates immediately before the COVID-19 pandemic but was falling short on percentage of children living in poverty and other measures, putting the Volunteer State in the bottom half nationally across four key domains of child well-being. That's 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.

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.

Despite its low rankings nationally, over the last decade Tennessee has seen an improvement in child well-being. As the pandemic ebbs, it is critical that Tennessee strengthens support for children to ensure positive trends continue.

"This is a pivotal time for Tennessee and we need to invest in our children in a strong, equitable and sustainable way," said Richard Kennedy, executive director of Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth, Tennessee's member of the KIDS COUNT network.

The *Data Book* shows simply returning to a pre-pandemic level of support for children and families would shortchange millions of kids and fail to address persistent racial and ethnic disparities.

Sixteen indicators measuring four domains — economic well-being, education, health, and family and community context — are used by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in each year's *Data Book* to assess child well-being. The annual KIDS COUNT data and rankings represent the most recent information available but do not capture the impact of the past year:

- **ECONOMIC WELL-BEING:** In 2019, one in five children lived in households with an income below the poverty line. Though higher than the national average, this percentage has decreased by 23% over the past decade.
- **EDUCATION:** In 2019, 60% of young children were not in school. This percentage has remained consistent in Tennessee, fluctuating little throughout the last decade.
- **AFFORDABLE HEALTH CARE:** In 2019, 80,000 Tennessee children did not have health insurance. Many of these children may be eligible for TennCare or CHIP. The year prior there were more than 55,000 uninsured children in Tennessee who were eligible for coverage through one of these programs.
- **FAMILY AND COMMUNITY CONTEXT:** In 2019, Tennessee experienced one of the highest teen birth rates in the nation. Tennessee's teen birth rate is 34% higher than the national average.

Survey data from the last year add to the story of Tennessee children and families in this moment:

- During the pandemic, in 2020, 23% of adults in Tennessee with children in the household had little to no confidence in their ability to pay their next mortgage or rent payment. However, by March 2021, this figure had fallen to 13%, suggesting the beginnings of a recovery. Although confidence is increasing, disparities persist, with 26% Black or African American Tennesseans reporting a lack of confidence in paying the rent or mortgage in March 2021.
- Tennessee has seen great improvement in children's access to internet and digital devices for schooling. In 2020, more than one in five children did not have access. By 2021 that number has been reduced to 13%.
- Despite improving indicators, nearly one in four adults in Tennessee with children in the household reported feeling down depressed or helpless in 2021, a number that remained unchanged since 2020.

"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 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.**
- **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.**

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 Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth

The Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth is an independent state agency created by the Tennessee General Assembly. Its primary mission is to lead systems improvement for all children and families through data-driven advocacy, education and collaboration. Information on the agency is available at www.tn.gov/tccy.

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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