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Contact: Michelle Luedtke | michelle@ourchildrenoregon.org | 503-236-9754

Oregon's Progress on Child Well-Being Sees Some Improvement, but Many Children and Youth are Experiencing Mental Health Challenges

State data show over 117,000 Oregon children with anxiety or depression — as effects of coronavirus crisis linger, Annie E. Casey Foundation finds

Portland — While Oregon experienced gains across many indicators of child well-being, according to the *2022 KIDS COUNT® Data Book*, our state is falling short of meaningful improvement to ensure all Oregon children thrive, notably when it comes to economic well-being and education. The *Data Book*, released today, is a 50-state report of recent household data developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation analyzing how children and families are faring across the nation. This year's *Data Book* also shares how American children and youth are in the midst of a mental health crisis. Young people in Oregon and nationwide are struggling with anxiety and depression at unprecedented levels. The U.S. surgeon general has described the conditions as a mental health pandemic among youth.

The *Data Book* release coincides with the **Oregon KIDS COUNT® Data Cards** released by Our Children Oregon, providing important state and county-level context with nearly 20 additional data indicators. Both these resources shed light on the health, economic, education, community and environmental challenges impacting children in Oregon. They also point to how such challenges disparately affect children of color and other marginalized identities, abilities, and backgrounds.

In 2020, Oregon ranked first nationwide with the lowest percentage (6.5%) of low birth weight babies, compared to a national average of 8.2%. While a cause for celebration, race/ethnicity data show that Black/African American children (11.3%) were nearly twice as likely to be born at low birth weights compared to their white peers (6%), highlighting inequities in outcomes for children of color that extend beyond this indicator. Comparisons of five-year averages between 2008-12 and 2016-20 show that Oregon saw improvement across several economic well-being indicators: the rate of children in poverty fell from 21% to 15%, children living in families where caregivers were struggling to maintain steady employment dropped from 34% to 27%, and families burdened with spending 30% or more of their income on housing went down from 43% to 31%. Similarly, education indicators also point to promising improvements, showing 3,000

more three- and four-year-olds were in school in 2016-20 than in 2008-12. New data are not yet available to show how K-12 literacy proficiency were impacted by the pandemic; however, in 2019, Oregon mirrored the national average, with two of every three fourth-graders (66%) not proficient in reading — a stark rate that should rally all levels of educational institutions to act for effective solutions for our children.

Each year, the *Data Book* presents national and state data from 16 indicators in four domains — economic well-being, education, health and family and community factors to understand how children are faring holistically. Data in this year's report are a mix of pre-pandemic and more recent figures and are the latest available. Oregon ultimately saw improvement across 12 of these 16 indicators. However, despite the incremental gains seen across the economic well-being and education indicators, Oregon continues to rank in the bottom half of states nationwide in both domains (30th and 41st, respectively). **We are falling short of building and fostering systems that ensure our children and families have the resources and opportunities to thrive. We know we can do better.**

“These positive shifts, however small, show that what we do as advocates, state leaders and community members matters. We know what it takes to have healthy, thriving children and youth,” said Jenifer Wagley, executive director of Our Children Oregon, Oregon's member organization of the KIDS COUNT network. “When it comes to economic well-being, we need a simplified, opt-out tax filing system that ensures that all families can cover their basic needs. We must look toward an education accountability system that centers our learners. A comprehensive literacy strategy based on the science of reading is one such example that can utilize the most up-to-date information to support teachers and the children and youth they serve.”

The *Data Book* reports that children in more than 40 states and the District of Columbia were more likely to experience anxiety and depression during the first year of the COVID-19 crisis than previously, with the national figure jumping 26%, from 9.4% of children ages 3-17 (5.8 million) to 11.8% (7.3 million) between 2016 and 2020, the year COVID-19 swept across the United States. This increase represents a staggering 1.5 million more children struggling to make it through the day. **In Oregon, the rise is even more dramatic — the statewide rate climbed by 40%, from 11% (83,000 children) to 16.1% (117,000 children), meaning nearly 34,000 more Oregon children experienced anxiety or depression in the first year of the pandemic.**

Findings reported in the **Oregon KIDS COUNT® Data Cards** show that in 2020, 14.5% of Oregon eighth graders reported having unmet emotional or mental healthcare needs during the pandemic due to being unable to access a healthcare provider. Douglas, Yamhill and Crook counties exceeded the state average in students reporting high levels of unmet mental healthcare needs at 27%, 25% and 23%, respectively. In contrast, Jefferson (5%), Morrow (6%), and Baker (7%) counties reported the lowest levels of unmet needs, with Multnomah, Oregon's more populous county, reporting 9%. At the statewide level, the inability to access mental health

services took its heaviest toll on children that identified as gender diverse (49%) or having multiple gender identities (31%), followed by females at 18% and males at 6%.

“There are many nuances regarding youth mental health in Oregon and the United States, and each data point only tells part of the story. Gender identity and race and ethnicity play major roles in facing systemic and interpersonal marginalization, accessing quality mental health services, and navigating stigmas around accessing this care,” shared Jyoni Tetsurō Shuler, research manager at Our Children Oregon. “As we consider what these data mean for Oregon, we must remember to uplift and center the diversity of experiences that our youth and families are grappling with during this time as we look to community-led solutions.”

Our Children Oregon joins the Casey Foundation in calling for lawmakers to heed the U.S. surgeon general’s warnings and respond to our youth mental health crisis by developing programs and policies to ease mental health burdens on children and their families. Policymakers are urged to:

- **Prioritize meeting children’s basic needs.** Youth who grow up in poverty are two to three times more likely to develop mental health conditions than their peers. Children need a solid foundation of nutritious food, stable housing, and safe neighborhoods — and their families need financial stability — to foster positive mental health and wellness.
- **Ensure every child has access to the mental health care they need, when and where they need it.** Schools should increase the presence of social workers, psychologists, and other mental health professionals on staff and strive to meet the 250-to-1 ratio of students to counselors recommended by the American School Counselor Association, and they can work with local health care providers and local and state governments to make additional federal resources available and coordinate treatment. In 2020-21, the ratio of students to counselors in [Oregon was 374-to-1](#).
- **Bolster mental health care that takes into account young people’s experiences and identities.** Services should be trauma-informed — designed to promote a child’s healing and emotional security — and culturally relevant to the child’s life. They should be informed by the latest evidence and research and should be geared toward early intervention, which can be especially important in the absence of a formal diagnosis of mental illness.

“Mental health is just as important as physical health in a child’s ability to thrive,” said Lisa Hamilton, president and CEO of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. “As our nation continues to navigate the fallout from the COVID crisis, policymakers must do more to ensure all kids have access to the care and support they need to cope and live full lives.”

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RELEASE INFORMATION

The 2022 KIDS COUNT® *Data Book* will be available 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 <http://datacenter.kidscount.org>.

The 2022 Oregon KIDS COUNT® *County Data Cards* will be simultaneously available at www.ourchildrenoregon.org. These interactive data dashboards feature state and county data, augmenting the national report's findings, highlighting climate and sustainability data and featuring available race/ethnicity data for many state-level indicators.

Join us on Wednesday, September 14, 2022, at 12 PM for our webinar, *The State of Oregon's Children*, where we will feature critical child well-being data and highlight ways we can build a future where all children thrive. Register for this free webinar at <http://ourchildrenoregon.org/events>.

ABOUT OUR CHILDREN OREGON

Our Children Oregon activates meaningful change statewide to ensure children statewide have what they need to thrive, regardless of their race, their ability, or where they live. We do this through policy, advocacy, research and engagement activities. 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 young children, youth, and young adults 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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