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Montana Ranks 18th in Child Well-Being, but Accessible and Affordable Child Care Still a Challenge for Families

Montana continues to rank in the middle of the pack for children's well-being, according to the **2023 KIDS COUNT® Data Book**, a 50-state report of recent household data developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation analyzing how children and families are faring. This year's report looks specifically at how children and families are doing now compared to just before the pandemic. Notably, the lack of affordable and accessible child care in Montana makes it challenging for parents to return to and stay in the workforce. At the same time, child care providers struggle to recruit and retain a workforce, with little wiggle room to raise wages without passing that cost onto parents.

Data from the report show that a child care worker earning median wage (\$12.84 per hour) and working full time is just above poverty level for a family of three. Child care workers in Montana deserve wages that reflect the value of their work. However, providers are often in a bind to raise wages without passing that cost onto parents. The cost of child care is already out of reach for many parents, costing more than \$8,600 on average for full-time care for a toddler at a child care center, more than the cost of in-state tuition at Montana State University.

Registered family and group child care programs play an important role in Montana's child care system, providing about half of the child care slots for infants while costing parents less on average compared to larger programs. "Montana policymakers made progress during the legislative session to support registered family child care programs," said Sheryl Hutzenbiler, a Co-Founder of the Montana Family Childcare Network. "We'd like to see ongoing support for family and group programs to help more programs open up and make sure family child care educators earn a living wage."

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. Data that stayed the same before and after the pandemic can be interpreted as a win because many families experienced added economic hardships and heightened mental health challenges during the pandemic. Historic investments in programs and policies that support children and families kept the trends from worsening further. Unfortunately, many of the programs and policies implemented during the pandemic have ended or returned to pre-pandemic funding levels. "I hope people see this data and connect the dots that investing in children and families mattered and made

sure more children and families had what they needed during a challenging time,” said Xanna Burg, Director of KIDS COUNT with the Montana Budget & Policy Center. “I also hope policymakers see this data and realize that continued investments are critical to keep moving in the right direction to support children’s well-being.”

Additional highlights from the report findings for Montana include:

- **Economic:** The percent of children living below poverty remained the same from 2019 to 2021. About 1 in 7 of children in Montana live in poverty. It is encouraging that the poverty rate did not worsen, yet this means the economic situation for many families remains challenging.
- **Education:** There was not a large decline in high school graduation rates, with 86 percent of students graduating on time in 2019-20 versus 87 percent in 2018-19. However, disparities exist for students of color. Black, Indigenous, and other youth of color are less likely to graduate on time because of generations of added barriers and unequal access to high-quality education.
- **Health:** About 7 percent of children lack health insurance in Montana in 2021, up slightly (from 6 percent) since 2019. The number of uninsured children has been increasing since 2017. Additionally, Montana had the highest child and teen death rate in a decade.

One area of continued investment and policy change is to support a child care system that works for children, families, and businesses. The Annie E. Casey Foundation calls on lawmakers to consider specific policies that strengthen the child care system:

- Federal, state, and local governments should invest more in child care. State and local governments should maximize remaining pandemic recovery act dollars to fund needed child care services and capacity.
- Public and private leaders should work together to improve the infrastructure for home-based child care, beginning by lowering the barriers to entry for potential providers by increasing access to start-up and expansion capital.
- To help young parents, Congress should expand the federal Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) program, which serves student parents.

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RELEASE INFORMATION

The 2023 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 datacenter.aecf.org.

About Montana KIDS COUNT

Montana KIDS COUNT is a leading resource for data on child and family well-being in the state and is dedicated to providing current, relevant, and reliable data to shape the issues affecting Montana children and families. More information can be found at montanakidscount.org/. Montana KIDS COUNT is a project of the

Montana Budget & Policy Center, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization providing in-depth research and analysis on budget, tax, and economic issues. More information can be found at www.montanabudget.org.

ABOUT THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

The Annie E. Casey Foundation creates a brighter future for the nation's young people 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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