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North Dakota Just Shy of Ranking in Top 10 States for Child Well-Being, but Accessible and Affordable Child Care Still a Challenge for Families

While North Dakota ranks high in some areas of children's well-being, many children and families are being left behind, 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 North Dakota makes it challenging for parents to return to and stay in the workforce. At the same time, child care businesses struggle to recruit and retain a workforce.

In North Dakota, a child care worker earning the median wage (\$12.86 per hour) and working full time falls just above poverty level for a family of three. Child care workers in North Dakota 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. Full-time care at a child care center for a toddler costs nearly \$10,000 on average, more than the cost of in-state tuition at the University of North Dakota.

North Dakota policymakers made progress during the legislative session by investing more state resources to support families and child care programs. However, funding for child care worker pay was left out of the additional investment. "We've heard loud and clear across North Dakota the pressing need to offer better pay and benefits to child care workers," said Erin Laverdure, member of the North Dakota Child Care Action Alliance. "The child care system does not work without stable and trained workers to care for children. It's time we value their work by offering fair pay without passing that cost directly to families who are already priced out of affording care."

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 the areas North Dakota improved and connect the dots that investing in children and families mattered. The added investments made sure more children and families had what they needed

during a challenging time,” said Xanna Burg, Director of KIDS COUNT with North Dakota KIDS COUNT. “That also means continuing investments and programs are critical to keep moving in the right direction to support children’s well-being.”

As in past years, North Dakota ranks high in economic well-being for families. This high ranking shows that some families are doing well. However, a high ranking often masks disparities. For example, Black and Indigenous children experience poverty rates three times higher than the overall rate for all North Dakota children. Present-day disparities in poverty are a result of generations of added barriers and systemic racism that made it harder for Black, Indigenous and other families of color to build economic security.

Additional highlights from the report findings for North Dakota include:

- **Economic:** The percent of children living below poverty remained the same from 2019 to 2021. About 1 in 10 children in North Dakota 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:** High school graduation rates slightly improved between 2018-19 and 2019-20 school year, and now sits at 89 percent. 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, better than 8 percent in 2019. The leveling off of uninsured children follows an increase the year before.

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 North Dakota KIDS COUNT

North Dakota 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 North Dakota children and families. More information can be found at ndkidscount.org. North Dakota 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. The Montana Budget & Policy Center also leads the KIDS COUNT work in Montana and South Dakota. 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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