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Tennessee Ranks 36th in Child Well-Being, Showing Improvement in Some Areas, Challenges in Others

50-State Data from Annie E. Casey Foundation evaluates state performance on 16 indicators across domains of Health, Economic Well-Being, Education and Family and Community

NASHVILLE, TENN — Tennessee ranks 36th in child 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. While 36th is a familiar spot for the state, evaluating changes in the individual indicators provide a guide for the state to further invest in our children, youth and families. New data included in the report highlights how our country's lack of affordable and accessible child care short-changes children and causes parents in Tennessee to frequently miss work or even quit their jobs, while those who can find care are paying dearly for it. These child care challenges cost the American economy billions of dollars a year and stymie women professionally.

The state saw its greatest improvement in the percentage of children living in high-poverty areas, which fell 47% between 2012-16 (15%) and 2017-21 (8%). Tennessee also saw an improvement in the percentage of children living in poverty between 2019 and 2021. The 2021 child poverty rate sits at 18%-the lowest rate the state has seen, bringing it nearly in line with the national average of 17%. The state saw an increase in the child and teen death rate between 2019 and 2021, jumping from 32 per 100,000 to 40 per 100,000 compared to a national rate of 30 per 100,000. Since the pandemic, Tennessee has seen an increase in the number and percentage of young people (16 to 19) who are not connected to school and work (1 in 14 youth are disconnected).

“The data contained in this report is valuable to us and all Tennesseans. It serves as a critical guide to support Tennessee as we look at areas we are doing well and how we can bolster that work and where we can come together as a state to do better by our children, youth and families,” said Richard Kennedy, executive director of Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth, Tennessee’s member of the KIDS COUNT network.

The Data Book reports too many parents cannot secure child care that is compatible with work schedules and commutes. The Data Book reports that in 2020—21, 12% of children birth to age 5 in Tennessee lived in families in which someone quit, changed, or refused a job because of problems with child care. The National figure is slightly higher than Tennessee’s, 13%. And women are five to eight times more likely than men to experience negative employment consequences related to caregiving.

Even if parents can find an opening at child care near their home, they often can’t pay for it. Tennessee’s average annual cost of center-based child care for a toddler was \$7,934, 8% of median income for a married couple and 27% of a single mother’s income in the state.

While the cost of care burdens families, child care workers are paid worse than 98% of professions. Median national pay for child care workers was \$28,520 per year or \$13.71 an hour in 2022, less than the wage for retail (\$14.26) and customer service (\$18.16) workers.

The failings of the child care market also affect the current and future health of the American economy, costing \$122 billion a year in lost earnings, productivity and tax revenue, according to one study. All of these challenges put parents under tremendous stress to meet the dual responsibilities of providing for their families and ensuring their children are safe and nurtured.

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 — and ranks the states according to how children are faring overall.

“A good child care system is essential for kids to thrive and our economy to prosper. But our current approach fails kids, parents, and child care workers by every measure,” said Lisa Hamilton, president and CEO of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. “Without safe child care they can afford and get to, working parents face impossible choices, affecting not only their families, but their employers as well.”

Transitioning from a faltering child care system to creating a flourishing one will take new thinking and investing at the local, state, and national levels. An executive order issued by President Biden in April is aimed at expanding access, lowering costs, and raising wages. It could prove to be a helpful framework, but more is needed:

- 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. Child care is a part of the critical infrastructure needed for an engaged workforce and a prosperous Tennessee. Innovative solutions to address the cost and availability of care are desperately needed.
- 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 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, youth 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 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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