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Education Crisis and Increase in Child Deaths Complicate Progress on Child Well-Being, Finds Annie E. Casey Foundation's 2026 KIDS COUNT Data Book

Annual Report Introduces New Index to Increase Accountability By Showing How State Policies and Public Investment Improve Children's Daily Lives

June 8, 2026 - BALTIMORE — The Annie E. Casey Foundation released the 37th edition of its *KIDS COUNT® Data Book*, finding that, between 2019 and 2024, overall child well-being declined, driven by factors such as a crisis in educational outcomes, an increase in child deaths, a drop in health insurance coverage after pandemic-era enhancements ended, and the rising burden of housing costs. The most comprehensive annual measure of child well-being in the United States also found two significant improvements: teen births dropped 24% and the share of children living in high-poverty areas fell 22%.

For the first time, states receive a comprehensive score (from 0 to 1,000) in the *Data Book* — not just a ranking — tracking 16 indicators over a five-year period from 2019 to 2024. The new scoring system shows whether policies and public investment are actually improving children's lives, not merely how states compare to each other. Nationally, the U.S. received a score of 547.

While New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Utah rank highest overall, and Louisiana, New Mexico and Mississippi rank lowest, the new scoring system provides a clearer picture of progress or decline within each state. New Hampshire's high score of 838 shows that even where kids are faring the best, there is room for improvement, while some of the consistently lowest-ranked states made some of the greatest progress.

"Behind every number in this report is a child who is either hungry or fed, housed or homeless, progressing academically or falling behind. No state is consistently getting this right," said **Lisa M. Lawson, president and CEO of the Annie E. Casey Foundation**. "The *Data Book* challenges us to follow the evidence and do what delivers results."

National data trends between 2019 and 2024 find:

- The overall score for the U.S. fell from 553 to 547, with vastly uneven changes among the *Data Book's* four domains:
 - Economic Well-Being improved from 551 to 557
 - Education plunged from 518 to 417
 - Health worsened from 624 to 607
 - Family and Community jumped from 518 to 608

- Children’s well-being declined in 29 states and improved in 15 states. Six states had no change in status.
- While it has improved slightly, the child and teen death rate remains a major concern - declining from a recent high of 30 per 100,000 in 2022 to 27 per 100,000 in 2024, a trend we hope continues.
- The share of children living in households burdened by high housing costs rose from 30% in 2019 to 31% in 2024, for a total of 22.4 million kids, representing an increase for the first time since 2010.
- In 2019 and 2024, 94% of kids had health insurance, which increased temporarily to 95% from 2021 through 2023 due to pandemic-era healthcare policies. In 2024, 4.6 million kids did not have health insurance, causing millions of missed opportunities to provide basic healthcare for the youngest Americans.
- State education scores are the lowest of the four domains, with only two states, Mississippi and Louisiana, posting improvements.
- The 22% decline in the percentage of kids residing in high-poverty neighborhoods represents about 1.3 million fewer children in these communities in 2020–24 compared to 2015–19. This progress continues a decade-plus trend.
- The 24% decline in the teen birth rate continues a positive trend, down nearly 80% since 1990 and holding at 13 births per 1,000 females ages 15 to 19 in 2023 and 2024.

This year’s *Data Book* demonstrated the direct impact of government policies and funding on the lives of young people in two historically low-ranking states:

- **New Mexico** ranks 49th, yet its child well-being score improved by 22 points, driven largely by significant progress in the Economic Well-Being domain. Data-driven recommendations and advocacy led lawmakers to expand the state child tax credit in 2023, helping families better afford essentials such as housing, food and childcare.
- **Mississippi** ranks 50th with an overall score of 271, but scored 448 in the Education domain, an improvement of 17 points in this area between 2019 and 2024. The Literacy-Based Promotion Act, passed in 2013, focuses on reading proficiency by third grade and making consistent investments in public schools. The state also invested in teacher training and early childhood education infrastructure.

The *Data Book* illustrates how a child’s location significantly affects well-being, with five of the seven highest-scoring states in the Northeast and 11 of the 15 lowest-scoring states in the South. However, eight states in the South improved their scores, including South Carolina by 38 points, the largest jump of any of the states.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation encourages policymakers, philanthropy and the corporate sector to unite in helping children and families thrive, which means ensuring they have stable homes, strong schools, nutritious food, meaningful relationships and opportunities to learn, play and grow. Programs and policies that meet these needs are smart investments, fostering long-term gains like employment and economic growth.

“Accessible public data provide a crucial reality check on whether states and the nation are making real progress for kids. With these numbers as our guide, we can direct resources where they have the greatest impact and expand opportunity for every child,” Lawson said.

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RELEASE INFORMATION

The 2026 *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 THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

The Annie E. Casey Foundation creates a brighter future for the nation’s children and youth 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.