

Improve the Nation's Data on Children and Families

FEDERAL POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Update the U.S.
poverty measure.

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Improve availability
and quality of state and
local data on child well-
being.

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Support efforts to
collect complete and
uniform data from birth
and death certificates.

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Fully fund, properly
manage, and
successfully promote
the 2010 Census.

Good decisions are based on good data, and a hallmark of the Casey Foundation's approach to helping children and families succeed is using sound data to advocate for change. The Foundation's KIDS COUNT effort consistently earns high marks and gets attention from policymakers for tracking changes in the educational, social, economic, and physical well-being of children in every state. However, the nation's ability to make the best program and policy decisions is often hampered by inadequate data. The overarching theme of the recommendations contained in this issue brief is a call for greater attention to the federal information infrastructure. If we let our once-world-class statistical infrastructure erode, it will hinder our ability to effectively craft good policy choices for children and families. Recommendations related to improving the data infrastructure in the juvenile justice and child welfare systems are provided in other issue briefs in this series.

Recommendation:

Update the U.S. poverty measure.

Research clearly demonstrates the adverse effects of poverty on all aspects of child development. However, the current U.S. poverty measure, established in the mid-1960s, is outdated and sharply underestimates the costs incurred by families, as well as their income, resources, and benefits. Child poverty remains a central focus of our nation's social policy agenda, yet poverty reduction efforts today are relying on a poverty measure that is obsolete.

There is growing interest in a campaign to cut the nation's child poverty rate in half over the next decade, yet the impact of many promising approaches -- expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), Child Care Tax Credit, and State Child Health Insurance Program -- is not included in the current poverty measure. Some states such as Connecticut, Illinois, Minnesota, and Delaware, and cities such as New York, are

setting their own targets for reducing child poverty. They need a measure that will accurately reflect progress, or lack of it, upon which to build their efforts.

Additionally, billions of federal and state dollars are distributed based on poverty estimates each year. An out-dated measurement of poverty means funds are being misallocated and not always reaching the families for whom they were intended. The deficiency of the poverty definition was recognized a decade ago by the National Academy of Sciences, which issued a report addressing the inadequacies in the current poverty measure and suggesting a sound alternative that:

- Adjusts income for core expenses related to work, child care, taxes, and out-of-pocket medical expenses;
- Accounts for non-cash sources of income, such as the EITC and Child Tax Credit, food stamps, and housing vouchers; and
- Accounts for geographic differences in the cost-of-living.

In the current economic climate, it is also important to note that making the changes needed to implement a more realistic poverty measure would require very little federal expenditure.

Currently the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has the authority to define how poverty is measured. Advocates believe that the prospect of developing a more accurate poverty measure would be enhanced if the authority to define how poverty is measured were under the auspices of a statistical agency, such as the Census Bureau.

Moreover, even a new, enhanced poverty definition would measure only one, relatively narrow aspect of family and child economic well-being. The federal government should follow the example of most other post-industrial nations, such as Canada and all of Europe, by developing, promulgating, and regularly publishing supplemental measures of social inclusion, such as asset and debt poverty and economic mobility.

To address these issues, the Casey Foundation recommends the following actions:

- Enact federal legislation to establish a new, updated poverty measure that reflects the recommendations issued by the National Academy of Sciences.

- Shift authority for determining how poverty is measured from OMB to a statistical agency.
- Develop a series of complementary indicators of family and child economic well-being – perhaps akin to those in Canada and the European Union – to supplement the new poverty measure.

Recommendation:

Improve availability and quality of state and local data on child well-being.

For more than a decade, the federal government has shifted responsibility for human service programs to states, yet state officials often lack timely, accurate, and state-specific data to ensure that these programs are achieving their goals. For example, most of the national measures used in the federal government’s *America’s Children* report are not available at the state level annually.

Problems with the existing system of state-level child indicators include:

- A shortage of data in substantive areas such as mental health, prosocial behavior, school success, peer influences, and neighborhood effects.
- A dearth of measures reflecting children in the key developmental stage from infancy through about age ten.
- A lack of timely, easy-to-use data. One rich source of state-level data on children, the National Survey of Children’s Health, is fielded only once every four years and the sample size in the survey has been cut for budgetary reasons making state estimates less precise.

Promising federal legislation, the State Child Well-Being Act of 2007, was introduced in the last Congress to establish a comprehensive annual survey on the condition of children in each state. The Casey Foundation offered to provide technical assistance to states and nonprofit agencies to help them access and use this new state-level data source. If this law had been passed, funding would have been provided to support a comprehensive national state-level survey that would have included several important features:

- Sufficient sample size to allow for precise estimates across major age groups, income groups, and race/ethnic groups with a sizable presence in every state.
- Annual (or continuing) administration to provide states with the most up-to-date estimates possible.
- Comprehensive information on all dimensions of child well-being.

The need for timely and accurate data to guide policy reform and program innovation does not stop at the state level. Neighborhood-level data are an essential tool for shaping and driving program innovation designed to help children and families. Such data are indispensable for churches, community centers, libraries, and local civic groups.

The American Community Survey (ACS) will be providing the socioeconomic data that the nation previously received from the Decennial Census, but for small geographic units the data quality will not be as good as the Census. This is particularly relevant for urban neighborhoods and small rural communities. The original sample size for the ACS had to be reduced for budgetary reasons. The small sample size in the ACS will strike urban neighborhoods and small rural communities particularly hard because the data they get from the ACS will not be as robust as data collected from the 2000 Census. A 2004 General Accountability Office evaluation of the ACS recommended that the Census Bureau increase sample size from 3 million to 4.8 million in order to improve the quality and timeliness of tract-level data, making it a better approximation of the kind of local area data from the 2000 Census.

To address these issues, the Casey Foundation recommends the following actions:

- Enact legislation like the State Child Well-Being Act of 2007 and provide \$20 million in annual funding to support a state-level survey that would provide concise, comprehensive, and regularly updated data on child and family well-being.
- Support efforts to increase ACS sample size to make more accurate data available for urban neighborhoods and small rural communities.

Recommendation:

Support efforts to collect complete and uniform data from birth and death certificates.

Birth and death certificate data are the major source of national, state, and local estimates for a wide range of topics. Data from birth and death certificates are one of few sources of data that are available and comparable for all local communities across the country. Of the ten measures used in the *KIDS COUNT Data Book* to rank states, five come from vital statistics data.

Many aspects of social policy planning are shaped by indicators, such as teen birth rates, births to unwed mothers, and the infant mortality rate, that are derived from the birth and death certificates.

The national birth and death data are the product of a federal-state partnership through which the federal government provides funds for states to collect and forward the data. However, years of decreased funding for the National Vital Statistics System (NVSS) at the National Center for Health Statistics have put a significant strain on the system. In late 2008, proposals called for eliminating as much as 75 percent of the data from birth and death certificates formerly reported by NVSS.

In addition, only half the states have been able to implement the version of the 2003 birth certificate form that includes new measures and revised questions to provide better data. The incompatibility between the older and newer versions mean that national estimates for determining outcome factors such as adequacy of pre-natal care, tobacco and alcohol use during pregnancy, and maternal education level can no longer be produced and many states can no longer be compared with each other. Without comparable birth certificate data across states it will be impossible to measure progress toward achieving numerous important indicators of child and family well-being.

To address these issues, the Casey Foundation recommends the following actions:

- Provide adequate funding to restore the birth and death certificate series and ensure the funds are used for that purpose. One proposal suggests a one-time cost of \$30 million to complete the change-over to the new certificates and then \$8–\$10 million a year to stay current.
- Support adoption of the new birth certificate form by all states.

Recommendation:

Fully fund, properly manage, and successfully promote the 2010 Census.

In a recent report, the General Accounting Office included the 2010 Census as one of 28 “high- risk” areas in the federal government because of continuing concerns related to information technology, budgeting, and operational planning at the Census Bureau. With our focus on improving outcomes for the nation’s vulnerable children and families, the Casey Foundation believes that bolstering the Decennial Census is essential for several reasons:

- It is used to make rational, needs-based decisions about the distribution of more than \$400 billion in federal funds each year. Most of the programs are designed to help needy communities. One widely cited study indicated that the undercount in the 2000 Census resulted in misallocation of \$4 billion each year.
- Census data are widely used by government agencies, the private sector, and nonprofit groups to calculate measures used to assess trends and target program dollars.
- It provides the most comprehensive snapshot for each of the thousands of local communities across our nation.
- It is constitutionally mandated for apportioning congressional districts and Census data are used to meet the one person-one vote mandate. Census data are also used to enforce the federal Voting Rights Act. Census undercounts dilute the political voice of families in disadvantaged communities.

Additionally, evidence from the Census Bureau has continued to show for more than 60 years that racial minorities and low-income communities are the most likely to be undercounted. There are a number of reasons why the challenge of getting a complete and accurate count in the 2010 Census will be even more difficult than in past years. These include an increase in many hard-to-count population groups; an unprecedented fear of government in immigrant communities; a housing crisis that has forced more people into unconventional housing situations (such as homeless shelters and families doubling up); and a large federal budget deficit that curtails the availability of funding for this effort.

To address these issues, the Casey Foundation recommends the following actions:

- Promptly support adequate funding for the Census Bureau, including the increased promotion of the 2010 Census in hard-to-count communities.
- Nominate and quickly confirm a new Census Bureau director, and make this a five-year term to ensure continuity during the most critical periods of Census preparation and implementation.
- Support advocates in low-income communities to monitor Census Bureau activity and educate residents in hard-to-count communities about the community benefits of participation in the Census and the safety of responding to Census takers.
- Support measures to make the Census Bureau an independent agency to make it more efficient and effective, and less vulnerable to partisan attack or manipulation.

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A special policy issue of our newsletter, *Casey Connects*, and a series of issue briefs with our recommendations for reducing poverty, rebuilding child welfare, reforming juvenile justice, and improving data collection on children and families can be found on the Annie E. Casey Foundation's website: www.aecf.org.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States. It was established in 1948 by Jim Casey, one of the founders of UPS, and his siblings, who named the Foundation in honor of their mother. The primary mission of the Foundation is to foster public policies, human-service reforms, and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today's vulnerable children and families. In pursuit of this goal, the Foundation makes grants that help states, cities, and neighborhoods fashion more innovative, cost-effective responses to these needs.