



**State Rankings on the Well-Being of Children in Low-Income Families:
Some Preliminary Findings**

By

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Executive Summary

Since the mid-1990s, states and local areas have been afforded more flexibility in creating and implementing social policies to improve children's lives. For example, between 2000 and 2002, federal and state spending on child welfare programs increased by 7 percent, and local government spending on child welfare increased by 15 percent. This devolution of power from the federal government to states and local communities has created a growing demand for state and local data on child well-being.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation's annual *KIDS COUNT Data Book* provides estimates and rankings of states based on 10 key indicators of child well-being. This paper expands on that effort by examining state-level differences in the well-being of children living in low-income families. Approximately 39 percent of children in the United States live in families with incomes below 200 percent of the poverty threshold. The examination of child well-being in low-income families is particularly important because negative child outcomes are concentrated in the low-income population, and many public policies and social support programs are aimed at helping low-income families. This paper uses data from the 2003 American Community Survey to examine state variation in the well-being of low-income children. The first part of the analysis ranks states based on the well-being of children living in low-income families (below 200 percent of the poverty line). The second section compares state rankings of the well-being of low-income children versus rankings for middle- and high-income children to determine how

children at different ends of the income scale are faring across states. Here are some of the key findings in the report:

- Overall, states in the Northeast have the lowest proportion of children living in low-income families and states in the South generally have the highest. There is substantial variation in the percent of children living in low-income families, ranging from 21 percent in New Hampshire to 56 percent in Mississippi.
- Of the 10 states that rank highest on the well-being of children in low-income families, eight are in the West and Midwest (Iowa, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming). Maine and Vermont also rank in the top 10.
- Minority children account for less than 36 percent of children in low-income families in the 10 states ranking highest on the well-being of low-income children. In the 10 states ranking lowest on the well-being of children in low-income families, the proportion of minority children in low-income families ranges from 49 percent (Massachusetts) to 80 percent (New Mexico).
- There are 10 states where state rankings for the well-being of low-income children are substantially *lower* than the state rankings for middle and high-income children. Seven of the 10 states are in the West (California, Colorado, Hawaii, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming). The rankings for Florida, Indiana, and New Hampshire fit a similar pattern.
- There are seven states where state rankings for the well-being of low-income children are substantially *higher* than state rankings for middle and high-income children. Four states are in the South (Delaware, Georgia, Kentucky, and Louisiana), two are in the Northeast (Massachusetts and Rhode Island), and one is in the Midwest (Ohio).
- Massachusetts has the greatest disparity in the well-being of low-income and middle- and high-income children. Middle- and high-income children in Massachusetts rank 19th among states on our measure of well-being, while low-income children in Massachusetts rank 42nd.

Background

Often termed the “devolution revolution,” in the 1990s, power began to shift from the federal to state governments, giving states more decision-making flexibility. Although the federal government can impose limitations on how federal funding can be spent, in general devolution from the federal to state governments has given state policymakers more discretion in setting policies and program rules regarding initiatives affecting children. In the first half of the 1990s, several states eliminated programs through direct legislation in their states. For example, in 1993 Michigan eliminated the General Assistance program that provided emergency cash relief, primarily to low-income single adults and to families with children who did not qualify for Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). The General Assistance program was replaced with the State Family Assistance and Disability Assistance programs, but these programs covered less than 20 percent of the cases covered under the General Assistance program. Other states obtained waivers from the federal government to modify federally funded welfare programs.

The growth in block grants has also shifted power from the federal to state governments. Block grants are fixed sums of money given by the federal government to state and local governments to support activity and administration. In 1996, during the Clinton administration, Congress passed major welfare reform legislation replacing the 60-year-old Assistance to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant, giving states more control over their programs. President George W. Bush has proposed a series of 10 block grants that would give states even more control over government programs, including Child Welfare, Food Stamps, Head Start, Section 8 Housing

vouchers, job transportation, and Medicaid. In sum, states governments have more power to affect children's lives through public policy decisions than they did prior to the 1990s.

President Bush has also asserted the importance of improving children's well-being through TANF. Since states have decision-making authority over TANF, and low-income children are most influenced by TANF, there is a growing demand for state-level data on the well-being of low-income children. On March 12, 2003, Senator Rockefeller introduced the "State Child Well-Being Research Act of 2004," which would require the federal government to collect state-level data on child well-being (U.S. Senate 2004). In response to the increase in state-level decision-making responsibility, there is a need for improvements in state-level data on child well-being. It has become clear that states' opportunities, constraints, and outcomes are closely linked to the social and economic forces operating in states and local areas.

Since 1990 the Annie E. Casey Foundation has published an annual *KIDS COUNT Data Book*, providing critical information about state-level trends for 10 key indicators of child well-being. The *Data Book* also ranks states based on an index of overall child well-being. Research has shown that the state rankings are closely linked to demographic and economic factors, as well as state policy initiatives (Cohen 1998). Since most state needs-based policies and programs are focused on low-income families, devising a set of measures that reflect the well-being of children in low-income families is likely to reflect the impact of state policies. The *KIDS COUNT Data Book* is an important source of information for states, and this report expands on that effort.

This analysis builds on previous research decomposing broader measures of child well-being by examining variation in the well-being of children in low-income families across states, using data from the testing phase of the American Community Survey.

The American Community Survey

Addressing state differences in child well-being has been hampered by the dearth of data available on the well-being of children, especially children in low-income families. The index measures used in this analysis are based on data from the 2003 American Community Survey (ACS), a survey of about 800,000 households that closely resembles the long-form questionnaire in the Decennial Census. The ACS is a large continuous survey of U.S. households designed to replace the census long-form questionnaire in 2010. Rather than collecting information every 10 years, the ACS is designed to collect demographic, housing, and socioeconomic data each year, providing critical social, demographic, and economic information for states and local communities. Starting in 2005, the ACS is collecting information from about 250,000 households each month, or about 3 million households per year.

The data for this analysis are based on the 2003 ACS Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) file. The PUMS file includes unweighted observations for more than 290,000 children. Sample sizes for the number of children in each state ranges from 1,962 in Maine to 29,265 children in California.

Methodology

This paper first examines the well-being of children living in low-income families based on eight measures of child well-being. The second section of the analysis compares state rankings for low-income children with state rankings for children in middle- and high-income families. Children in this analysis are considered low-income if they live in families with incomes below 200 percent of the poverty threshold. Although there is no official definition of “low-income,” researchers have generally classified families with income less than 200 percent

of the poverty threshold as low-income families. For example, annual poverty tables published by the Census Bureau include rates for families below 200 percent of poverty, and the Urban Institute uses a similar definition to identify low-income families in the National Survey of American Families. Moreover, many public programs such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), School Lunch Program, and the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) provide benefits to families with incomes between 100 and 200 percent of poverty. In 2002, the low-income threshold for a family of four was about \$37,000. Table 1 shows that a substantial portion of means-tested government assistance goes to families with incomes between 100 and 200 percent of poverty. For example, 40 percent of households receiving free or reduced price school lunch and 49 percent of households receiving Earned Income Tax Credits have incomes between 100 percent and 200 percent of poverty.

Table 1. Receipt of Welfare Benefits by Poverty Level: 2002

	Percent of all recipients between 100% and 200% of poverty	Number of Children* rounded to nearest 1,000				Total
		Under 100% of poverty	Between 100% and 200% of poverty	Between 200% and 300% of poverty	Over 300% of poverty	
Children living in families/households receiving:						
Food Stamps	27	5,595	2,321	400	138	8,454
Free or Reduced Price School Lunch	40	7,664	7,031	2,141	643	17,480
SCHIP or Medicaid	34	8,100	6,633	2,628	2,202	19,563
Subsidized Housing.	26	2,679	1,073	238	106	4,096
Cash Public Assistance or Welfare	27	2,947	1,370	493	320	5,130
Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)	49	7,825	11,187	2,695	1,034	22,741
Child Care Subsidy	35	763	604	234	142	1,742
Energy Assistance	37	1,423	902	100	9	2,434

*Living in households and in the poverty universe

Source: 2003 Current Population Survey (Annual Social and Economic Supplement)

The measures used in this analysis are drawn from *Children at Risk: State Trends 1990-2000*, a report published by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The report was based on data from the Census 2000 Supplemental Survey (C2SS) and featured 11 measures of child well-being. The measures in the *Children at Risk* Report were selected in consultation with an advisory group of demographers and child advocates to reflect several aspects of child well-being. This analysis uses eight of the 11 measures from that report. The percent of children in poverty, the percent of children in low-income working families, and a Family Risk Index are not included because the definitions of these measures exclude children in middle- and high-income families. The eight measures included in this analysis are listed below.

1. The percent of related children living in single parent families.
2. The percent of related children living in families where no parent has full-time, year-round employment.
3. The percent of related children living with a household head who is a high school dropout.
4. The percent of related children living in households without a telephone.
5. The percent of related children living in households without a vehicle.
6. The percent of related children who have difficulty speaking English (ages 5-17).
7. The percent of all teenagers who are high school dropouts (ages 16-19).
8. The percent of all teenagers who are not attending school and not working (ages 16-19).

Although this is not an exhaustive set of child well-being measures, they cover several key dimensions of child well-being, including family structure, education, employment status of parent(s), and the availability of household resources (phone and car). Combining these individual measures into an overall index provides a reasonable approximation of child well-being.

Measures one through six are restricted to related children under age 18. Related children include children of the householder related through birth, marriage, or adoption, and children under age 18 who are not children of the householder but are related to the householder such as nieces and nephews. Although unrelated children include some of the most vulnerable

young people, such as those in foster care or in juvenile justice facilities, they account for only 2 percent of all children living in households.

The universe for the last two measures, percent of teenagers who are high school dropouts and percent of teenagers not attending school and not working, include all persons ages 16 to 19, regardless of relationship to the householder. About 48 percent of children ages 16 to 19 are not related to the householder, thus the exclusion of unrelated children would introduce sample selection bias into the analysis. It should be noted that the 2003 ACS does not include individuals living in group quarters (e.g. juvenile institutions, college dormitories, military quarters, group homes). The Census Bureau hopes to include the group quarters population in the ACS sampling frame starting in 2006.

Researchers have shown that the income levels in a state are related to overall child outcomes. In the 2003 ACS, the share of children living in families with income below 200 percent of the poverty threshold varies from 21 percent in New Hampshire to 56 percent in Mississippi. The District of Columbia is excluded from the analysis because it differs widely from other states rendering comparisons ambiguous.

States are ranked on each of the eight measures for both low-income and middle- and high-income children. To account for the varying distribution of the eight measures, (the standard deviations for the eight measures range from 3.1 to 8.2) the state estimates for each of the eight measures are converted into standardized z-scores, and summed across each state. States with tied scores are given the same rank. An index is created using the summed standardized scores on all eight measures for low-income children, and states are then ranked based on the overall well-being of low-income children. Negative summed scores indicate better conditions for children and positive scores signify worse conditions. The same procedure is

repeated for children living in middle- and high-income families (incomes at 200 percent of poverty or above).

Results

This section consists of two parts. The first part of the analysis ranks states based on the well-being of children living in low-income families (below 200 percent of the poverty line). The second section compares state rankings of the well-being of low-income children versus rankings for middle- and high-income children to determine how children at different ends of the income scale are faring across states.

The Percent of Children in Low-Income Families

There is substantial variation in the percent of children living in low-income families, ranging from 21 percent in New Hampshire to 56 percent in Mississippi. Overall, states in the Northeast have the lowest proportion of children living in low-income families and states in the South generally have the highest. Table 2 presents state rankings by the percent of children living in low-income families. Five of the top 10 states are in the Northeast (Connecticut, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island) and three are in the South but clustered along the eastern shore (Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia). On the other hand, eight of the 10 states with the highest percentage of children living in low-income families are in the South (Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Texas, and West Virginia) and none are in the Northeast.

Table 2. Percent of Children in Families with Incomes Under 200 Percent of Poverty

State	Percent of Children in Low-Income Families	Rank
New Hampshire	21.1	1
Maryland	23.3	2
Connecticut	23.6	3
Minnesota	24.0	4
Massachusetts	25.7	5
New Jersey	26.6	6
Delaware	29.6	7
Virginia	30.1	8
Rhode Island	30.9	9
Colorado	31.3	10
Vermont	32.0	11
Wisconsin	32.7	12
Alaska	33.0	13
Iowa	33.4	14
North Dakota	34.2	15
Nebraska	34.3	16
Washington	34.8	17
Maine	35.3	18
Utah	35.3	18
Michigan	35.4	20
Wyoming	35.4	20
Hawaii	35.5	22
Illinois	35.7	23
Kansas	36.3	24
Pennsylvania	36.6	25
Ohio	36.9	26
South Dakota	37.1	27
Nevada	37.9	28
Indiana	38.0	29
Missouri	39.0	30
New York	39.8	31
Oregon	40.6	32
Georgia	40.7	33
California	42.1	34
Florida	42.2	35
Idaho	42.3	36
South Carolina	42.8	37
Tennessee	42.9	38
Arizona	44.6	39
North Carolina	44.7	40
Montana	44.8	41
Kentucky	46.1	42
Alabama	47.0	43
Texas	47.3	44
Arkansas	48.7	45
West Virginia	49.4	46
Oklahoma	49.8	47
Louisiana	50.3	48
New Mexico	53.9	49
Mississippi	56.0	50

Source: Population Reference Bureau, analysis of the 2003 ACS PUMS.

The Well-Being of Children in Low-Income Families

Table 3 includes state rankings based on the well-being of children in low-income families. A negative score indicates better overall child well-being. A different picture emerges. Whereas states in the Northeast performed the best and states in the South performed the worst in

terms of the proportion of children living in low-income families, there is not a clear geographical difference in the well-being of children in low-income families between the different regions. Although two Northeastern states rank in the top 10 (Maine and Vermont), three Northeastern states rank in the bottom 10 (Massachusetts, New York, and Rhode Island). Massachusetts ranks fifth, and Rhode Island ranks ninth on the percent of children living in low-income families but ranks 42nd and 50th respectively in the overall well-being of low-income children. Therefore, although smaller proportions of children in Massachusetts and Rhode Island are living in low-income families relative to other states, low-income children in Massachusetts and Rhode Island are not faring well in comparison with low-income children in other states. Three Southern states are in the bottom 10 (Georgia, Louisiana, and Maryland) and none of the Southern states are

Table 3. Ranking of States on the Well-Being of Children in Low-Income Families

State	Summed Z-Score	Rank
Utah	-10.9	1
North Dakota	-9.3	2
Wyoming	-8.3	3
Vermont	-8.1	4
Maine	-6.7	5
Montana	-6.2	6
South Dakota	-6.1	7
Kansas	-5.7	8
Nebraska	-5.2	9
Iowa	-5.0	10
Idaho	-4.5	11
New Hampshire	-3.8	12
Washington	-3.4	13
Wisconsin	-2.5	14
Minnesota	-2.3	15
Oklahoma	-2.0	16
Hawaii	-1.9	17
Missouri	-1.6	18
Oregon	-1.3	19
Virginia	-0.9	20
Florida	0.1	21
West Virginia	0.2	22
Michigan	0.2	22
Arkansas	0.2	22
Colorado	0.6	25
Pennsylvania	0.7	26
New Jersey	0.7	26
South Carolina	0.8	28
Ohio	1.6	29
Indiana	1.6	29
Tennessee	1.9	31
Alabama	2.0	32
California	2.1	33
Delaware	2.4	34
Kentucky	2.5	35
Connecticut	3.1	36
Texas	3.3	37
Mississippi	3.6	38
Arizona	3.7	39
North Carolina	3.7	39
Illinois	3.8	41
Massachusetts	4.1	42
New Mexico	4.7	43
Maryland	5.2	44
Georgia	5.2	44
New York	6.5	46
Nevada	7.5	47
Louisiana	7.7	48
Alaska	7.7	48
Rhode Island	8.9	50

Source: Population Reference Bureau, analysis of the 2003 ACS PUMS.

in the top 10. Other states in the bottom 10 include Alaska, Illinois, Nevada, and New Mexico.

The 10 states ranking highest on the well-being of children in low-income families include Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, Vermont, and Wyoming. Eight of the 10 states in which low-income children are faring the best are located in the West and Midwest.

In addition to the geographic patterns there is also a racial overlay. Table 4 shows state rankings in the percentage of low-income children who are minority (defined in this analysis as any racial/ethnic group other than “non-Hispanic white”). Minority children comprise less than 36 percent of all children in low-income families in the 10 states ranked best on the well-being index for children in low-income families. In contrast, the percent of the low-income child population that is

Table 4. Ranking of States on the Percent of Low-Income, Minority Children

State	Percent of Low-Income Children who are Minority	Rank
Vermont	5.1	1
Maine	8.1	2
West Virginia	9.1	3
New Hampshire	14.5	4
South Dakota	16.2	5
Iowa	17.9	6
Kentucky	19.9	7
Wyoming	21.1	8
North Dakota	25.2	9
Idaho	25.4	10
Montana	26.6	11
Utah	30.6	12
Indiana	31.1	13
Missouri	31.9	14
Nebraska	34.1	15
Kansas	35.4	16
Ohio	35.8	17
Pennsylvania	36.6	18
Wisconsin	37.3	19
Oregon	37.8	20
Minnesota	38.2	21
Tennessee	41.5	22
Oklahoma	41.5	22
Arkansas	41.9	24
Washington	42.6	25
Michigan	45.7	26
Massachusetts	49.0	27
Virginia	53.0	28
Rhode Island	53.5	29
North Carolina	54.7	30
Alabama	55.0	31
Colorado	56.2	32
Delaware	59.2	33
Alaska	59.9	34
Connecticut	60.3	35
Nevada	62.6	36
Louisiana	62.8	37
Florida	64.2	38
South Carolina	64.3	39
Illinois	64.5	40
Maryland	64.8	41
Georgia	64.9	42
Mississippi	66.0	43
New York	66.1	44
New Jersey	68.1	45
Arizona	73.1	46
New Mexico	79.5	47
Texas	80.1	48
California	83.5	49
Hawaii	88.4	50

Source: Population Reference Bureau, analysis of the 2003 ACS PUMS.

minority in the 10 states with the lowest scores on the well-being index for low-income children ranges from 49 percent in Massachusetts to 80 percent in New Mexico. These patterns suggest that the states in which low-income children are faring the worst are more likely to be in the South and have larger minority populations than the states performing the best on the well-being index. States with the best rankings on the well-being of children in low-income families are most likely to be in the West and have relatively small proportions of minority children.

The Relative Well-Being of Children in Low-, Middle-, and High-Income Families

Whereas the previous section ranked states based on the well-being of low-income children, this section examines the *relative* well-being of low-income children, compared to the well-being of middle- and high-income children. There are some states that rank low on the well-being of low-income children but rank high on the well-being of middle- and high-income children. Other states rank high on the well-being of low-income children, but relatively substantially lower on the well-being of middle- and high-income children. For this analysis, we focus on states with at least a ten-point difference between the rankings of low-income children vs. middle- and high-income children.

Seven of the 10 states where state rankings for low-income children are substantially higher than state rankings for middle and high-income children are in the West (California, Colorado, Hawaii, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming) (see Table 5). The rankings in Florida, Indiana, and New Hampshire fit a similar pattern. Low-income children in these 10 states are doing relatively well, compared with low-income children in other states, while children in middle- and high-income families are faring worse than their counterparts most other states.

Table 5. Ranking of States on Well-Being Between Children in Low-, Middle-, and High-Income Families

State	Summed Z-scores		Rank		Rank Difference
	Middle and High Income Children	Low-Income Children	Middle and High Income Children	Low-Income Children	
Hawaii	6.2	-1.9	43	17	26
Washington	2.3	-3.4	36	13	23
Wyoming	-1.1	-8.3	24	3	21
Florida	2.8	0.1	39	21	18
Indiana	7.3	1.6	46	29	17
Colorado	3.6	0.6	41	25	16
Utah	-1.8	-10.9	16	1	15
California	6.4	2.1	44	33	11
New Hampshire	-1.2	-3.8	23	12	11
Oregon	0.0	-1.3	29	19	10
Arizona	8.8	3.7	48	39	9
Arkansas	0.5	0.2	30	22	8
Montana	-3.8	-6.2	12	6	6
South Carolina	2.2	0.8	33	28	5
Texas	4.3	3.3	42	37	5
New Mexico	8.2	4.7	47	43	4
New York	10.6	6.5	50	46	4
Oklahoma	-1.5	-2.0	19	16	3
Maine	-5.6	-6.7	7	5	2
Mississippi	3.4	3.6	40	38	2
Nevada	9.7	7.5	49	47	2
Alabama	2.2	2.0	33	32	1
Kansas	-5.1	-5.7	9	8	1
Vermont	-5.9	-8.1	5	4	1
Michigan	-1.3	0.2	21	22	-1
North Carolina	2.7	3.7	38	39	-1
North Dakota	-8.5	-9.3	1	2	-1
Pennsylvania	-0.9	0.7	25	26	-1
West Virginia	-1.3	0.2	21	22	-1
Idaho	-5.1	-4.5	9	11	-2
Alaska	6.6	7.7	45	48	-3
Missouri	-2.0	-1.6	15	18	-3
Nebraska	-6.5	-5.2	4	9	-5
South Dakota	-7.6	-6.1	2	7	-5
Connecticut	0.5	3.1	30	36	-6
Tennessee	-0.9	1.9	25	31	-6
Virginia	-2.7	-0.9	14	20	-6
Iowa	-7.0	-5.0	3	10	-7
Minnesota	-5.5	-2.3	8	15	-7
Illinois	2.2	3.8	33	41	-8
Maryland	2.3	5.2	36	44	-8
New Jersey	-1.6	0.7	18	26	-8
Wisconsin	-5.7	-2.5	6	14	-8
Georgia	1.7	5.2	32	44	-12
Kentucky	-1.7	2.5	17	35	-18
Ohio	-4.6	1.6	11	29	-18
Delaware	-3.5	2.4	13	34	-21
Louisiana	-0.4	7.7	27	48	-21
Rhode Island	-0.1	8.9	28	50	-22
Massachusetts	-1.5	4.1	19	42	-23

Source: Population Reference Bureau, analysis of the 2003 ACS PUMS.

Of the seven states where state rankings for low-income children are substantially *lower* than middle- and high-income children, four are in the South (Delaware, Georgia, Kentucky, and Louisiana), two are in the Northeast (Massachusetts and Rhode Island), and one is in the Midwest (Ohio). Massachusetts has the largest gap in rankings, indicating wide disparities in the well-being of children at different income levels. Middle- and high-income children in Massachusetts state rank 19th compared to middle- and high-income children in other states, while low-income children rank 42nd compared to low-income children in other states.

Conclusion

The results of this analysis have shown that there is geographic variation in the distribution and well-being of children in low-income families. Northeastern states have the lowest proportion of children in low-income families, while states in the South have some of the highest proportions of children in low-income families. Despite the smaller proportions of children in low-income families in the Northeast, only two Northeastern states rank in the top 10 on the well-being of children in low-income families (Maine and Vermont) and three states rank in the bottom 10 (Massachusetts, New York, and Rhode Island). Therefore, while children are less likely to live in low-income families in the Northeast, they do not fare substantially better—and fare worse in some areas—compared to low-income children in other states.

Several states in the West and Midwest rank in the top 10 on the well-being of children in low-income families (Iowa, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming). Not only do low-income children fare better in these states, but eight of the 10 states where low-income children rank substantially higher than middle- and high-income children are in the West and Midwest (California, Colorado, Hawaii, Indiana, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and

Wyoming). The high rankings of states in the West and Midwest are surprising because states in the Northeast generally rank best in measures of well-being for all children. The results point to the need for researchers and policymakers to pay more attention to the unique characteristics and needs of low-income children in different parts of the country.

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