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CONTACT: Byron Johnson, 202-842-3600, ext. 230
kidscount@hagersharp.com

Sue Lin Chong, 410-223-2836
schong@aecf.org

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2007 KIDS COUNT Data Book Shows Slipping Economic Conditions for Children, Focuses on the Critical Importance of Lifelong Family Connections for Youth in Foster Care

BALTIMORE – National trends in child well-being taken together have improved slightly since 2000, according to a report released today by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The 18th annual *KIDS COUNT Data Book* indicators show:

- Four areas of improvement: child death rate, teen birth rate, high school dropout rate, teens not in school and not working;
- Two areas of slight improvement: infant mortality rate, teen death rate; and
- Four areas have worsened: low-birthweight babies, children living in families where no parent has full-time year-round employment, children in poverty, and children in single-parent families.

These national trends are not on par with the well-being improvements that were seen at the end of the 1990s, with economic indicators taking a downturn in 2005. The report also examines America's child welfare system and challenges the country to make lifelong family connections for children and youth in foster care a national priority.

"KIDS COUNT contains some good and bad news," says Laura Beavers, research associate at the Annie E. Casey Foundation. "While well-being indicators have largely gotten better for teens, they've gotten worse for babies. We also see persistent disparities in outcomes for children of color, particularly African Americans." Looking across all well-being indicators, Minnesota, New Hampshire, and Connecticut rank highest, and Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi rank the lowest.

Each year, the *KIDS COUNT Data Book* provides information and statistical trends on the conditions of America's children and families. In 2007, the report also looks at the 726,000 children in the United States who spend time in foster care each year and what can be done to build and strengthen the family relationships that these children need. "While keeping children safe is an essential role and responsibility of our child welfare systems," says Douglas W. Nelson, president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation in Baltimore, "the full measure of success should be how fully the systems assure strong and safe lifelong families for every child they serve."

The *KIDS COUNT Data Book's* essay, "Lifelong Family Connections: Supporting Permanence for Children in Foster Care," looks at how the United States can move toward having all children who are in foster care become part of a lifelong family. Child welfare advocates have asserted for decades that children in foster care need a permanent family connection that they can expect to be theirs through adulthood, yet this concept has not yet become a paramount and defining goal of child welfare work. Children and youth who spend extensive time in foster care and leave care without a strong family relationship are at great risk of experiencing early parenthood, involvement with the criminal justice system, poverty, and homelessness.

The *KIDS COUNT Data Book's* essay calls on our child welfare systems and federal legislators to make significant changes and support bold policies that can bring family connections and better life outcomes to all children and youth in foster care.

"Removing a child from his or her home should be the last, rather than the first option, with the understanding that kids must be kept safe from physical harm," declares Patrick McCarthy, vice president of System and Service

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701 St. Paul Street

Baltimore, MD 21202

410 547.6624 Fax

410 547.6600

www.kidscount.org

Reform, at the Annie E. Casey Foundation. “Placement in foster care should be a means of moving toward a lasting family, with kids going into family settings and their own neighborhoods and living with their siblings whenever possible. Stays in foster care should be brief and systems should enable family connections for kids through reunification, legal guardianship, and adoption.” Child welfare systems are also urged to give families and children sufficient “post-permanency” supports, such as counseling, education, financial help, and respite care.

The essay points out that African-American children and older youth in foster care are particularly vulnerable and have the most alarming life outcomes. On a single day in 2005, 32 percent of the children in foster care were African American, though only 15 percent of all the children in the United States were African American. National studies, however, have shown no statistically significant difference in substantiated maltreatment rates between black and white families. Once in foster care, African-American children stay longer in the system – for children entering care in 2000, 23 percent of the African-American children stayed for three years or more, compared to 13 percent of the white children. The Annie E. Casey Foundation believes that systems can reduce disparities by committing to actions that can better prepare case workers and broaden community partnerships with churches and nonprofit organizations in African-American neighborhoods.

For many older youth, our child welfare systems have given up on finding them a permanent family. These older youth are expected to remain in care until they “age out” and more than 22,000 youth did so in 2004. To make matters worse, the majority of states have set their emancipation age at 18, a time when teens have to leave care, with many not prepared to become independent, thriving adults. To improve the chances of achieving family permanence, the Annie E. Casey Foundation recommends that child welfare systems make a commitment that children of all ages will have a family or guardian relationship that will continue into adulthood when they leave foster care. Older youth should also play an active role in planning for their future and identifying adults who can serve as permanent guardians.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation notes that a different approach to decision making and changes in front-line practice can help achieve permanence for youth. One successful approach used by Annie E. Casey Foundation grantees and others is “team decision-making,” which can help put more children on the road to permanence. Under this model, a case worker and a supervisor; the parent(s) and child(ren); friends; relatives; and community members share information on the types of supports that might be mobilized to help the child and the family.

The essay calls on federal elected officials and policymakers to focus attention on child welfare financing reform, better data collection, and increased accountability to support greater permanence for children in foster care. Recommended policy changes include allowing federal funds to be used for permanent guardianship and permitting states the flexibility to spend Title IV-E funds on programs that stress prevention, family support, and aftercare services. At this time, there is no federal funding provision to support permanent legal guardianship, which allows a child the benefit of a lifelong family, without terminating the parental rights of the child’s mother or father.

“The nation needs to do more than simply talk about the importance of lifelong family connections for children in foster care,” concludes Nelson. “We have good information on what works so there is no reason why we cannot implement the bold policy and system changes that can make permanence a reality. Today, more than ever, children need a loving stable family they can turn to for life. The challenge is to make the expectations that we all hold for our own families the norm for how child welfare systems operate nationally.”

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization, whose primary mission is to foster public policies, human-service reforms, and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today’s vulnerable children and families. For more information, visit www.aecf.org.

The *KIDS COUNT Data Book* with state-by-state rankings, supplemental data, and the essay, “Lifelong Family Connections: Supporting Permanence for Children in Foster Care,” is EMBARGOED until July 25, 3:00 a.m. EDT, but can be viewed online at www.kidscount.org/2007databook, beginning July 10. Please call 202-842-3600, extension 230 for the password.