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Investments in health coverage, education paying off for Arkansas kids

State still ranks poorly in economic well-being of children

LITTLE ROCK - Arkansas made gains in health coverage and education over the last year, but the child poverty rate went up to 29 percent. Those ups and downs are consistent with national trends, according to the 25th edition *KIDS COUNT Data Book*, an annual report on the well-being of our nation's children from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Arkansas improved in every health category measured by the Casey Foundation. The number of children without insurance is down to an all-time low of six percent. Child deaths per 1,000 also decreased, as did the number of low-birth weight babies and teens who abuse alcohol or drugs. These gains show that investments in health programs that help kids – especially ARKids First – have made huge improvements in Arkansas.

The state also made gains in education, increasing the number of proficient scores in reading and math. The number of kids attending pre-K has remained steady, despite a lack of added funding from the state budget. Funding for the state's pre-K program has not increased in seven years (effectively it's been cut if you consider inflation and cost of living increases). The initial investment the state made in pre-K after the Lake View case was a good start. However, Arkansas would greatly improve in this category with extra state funding.

The report was not completely positive. The child poverty rate in Arkansas increased to 29 percent in 2012, up from 25 percent in 2005. Other states are experiencing similar increases in child poverty, likely due to the depth and severity of the recession.

"We now know more than ever before about how to give children a good start and help them meet major developmental milestones throughout childhood," says Rich Huddleston, executive director of Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families. "On several fronts, we've seen the difference

that smart policies, effective programs and high-quality practice can make in improving child well-being and long term outcomes. We should all be encouraged by the improvements in many well-being indicators in the health, education, and safety areas, but we must do much more.”

“One of the main issues is the state budget,” Huddleston says. “If we truly care about the well-being of our children, our students, our future workforce, we need to put our money where our mouth is. We need to continue investments in children’s health care, and we have to increase funding for pre-K.”

A few other interesting points from the report:

- Nationally, a smaller percentage of children live in families in which no parent has a high school diploma – from 22 percent in 1990 to 15 percent in 2012.
- The teen birth rate is at a historic low.
- The child poverty rate is increasing nationally, as well. Although it dropped from 18 to 16 percent from 1990 to 2000, the rate had reached 22 percent by 2010 and has remained at roughly that level. In 2012, nearly 16.4 million kids were living in poverty.
- By 2018, children of color will represent a majority of children.
- Despite tremendous gains during recent decades for children of all races and income levels, inequities among children remain deep and stubbornly persistent.

The [KIDS COUNT Data Book](#) features the latest data on child well-being for every state, the District of Columbia and the nation. This information is available in the [KIDS COUNT Data Center](#), which also contains the most recent national, state and local data on hundreds of measures of child well-being. Data Center users can create rankings, maps and graphs for use in publications and on websites, and view real-time information on mobile devices.

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Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families is a statewide, non-profit child advocacy organization established in 1977. Our mission is to ensure that all children and their families have the resources and opportunities to lead healthy and productive lives and to realize their full potential.

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