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Gains in Health and Education Despite Economic Challenges

Report ranks North Carolina 34th in the nation for child well-being

RALEIGH—Although North Carolina children have made significant long-term gains in health and education, troubling setbacks in family economic security threaten to undermine their overall well-being, according to the latest *KIDS COUNT Data Book* released today by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

The 2014 *KIDS COUNT Data Book* examines 16 measures of child well-being in four categories ranking states from 1 to 50 according to their outcomes for children. North Carolina ranks 34th in the nation for overall child well-being, faring among the worst states for Economic Well-Being (38), and performing only slightly better for Family and Community (36), and Health (32). North Carolina received its highest rank in Education (28).

“We know what children need to be successful—a healthy start in life, stable families, a quality education, and safe and secure communities,” said Laila A. Bell, director of research and data at NC Child, home of the NC KIDS COUNT project. “These data show our children are at risk of falling behind in key areas, leaving them underprepared to compete and excel in the 21st century economy.”

In 2012, 26 percent of children in North Carolina lived in poverty, up 24 percent from 2005. Studies show poverty is one of the greatest threats to healthy growth and development, dampening life trajectories and placing children at risk for a slate of poor outcomes, including reduced academic achievement, high dropout rates, health problems, substance abuse, and greater likelihood of living in poverty during adulthood.

The data suggest North Carolina families are still reeling from the harsh impact of a poor economy. One in three children in North Carolina (33 percent) lives in a family where their parents lack secure employment or have a high housing cost burden (34 percent).

“North Carolina ranks a low 39th for child poverty and a greater share of our children are being raised in high poverty neighborhoods than in West Virginia,” said Bell. “It is important that we invest in solutions that have been shown to help children overcome the negative effects of poverty, like high-quality early education. Unfortunately, more than half of our children ages 3 to 4 are currently not attending preschool, and our legislators have debated proposals to restrict—not expand—access to early education in recent years.”

North Carolina children fared better in the Health domain, improving three out of the four indicators by 20 percent or more during a five-year period. The percentage of children without health insurance declined by 20 percent to 8 percent in 2012; child and teen deaths declined by 21 percent to 27 per 100,000 children ages 1 to 19 in 2010; and the percentage of teens ages 12 to 17 who reported abusing alcohol or drugs in the past year fell by 25 percent to 6 percent in 2011-2012.

(MORE)

North Carolina slipped one spot in Education, but a closer look at the data reveals significant gains in high school graduation. Between 2005/2006 and 2011/2012, the share of high school students not graduating on time declined by a quarter to 21 percent.

“A well-educated workforce is a powerful tool that drives economic growth,” said Bell. “By 2018, 59 percent of all jobs in North Carolina will require some education beyond high school. Getting students to graduate on time is an important first-step toward ensuring more North Carolina students are on the pathway toward postsecondary education and training.”

Long-Term Trends Highlight the Importance of Strategic Investments

This year’s *Data Book* marks the 25th edition of the report, which has evolved over time to offer an increasingly sophisticated view of how children fare nationally and by state. Bell says long-term trends highlight the difference effective programs and high quality practice can make in improving child well-being today, and over time.

“In two decades, North Carolina has made tremendous progress in reducing the percentage of uninsured children, boosting high school completion rates, and preparing children to read and do math proficiently,” said Bell. “These gains started with strategic investments in public programs like CHIP, preschool, and early intervention—to name a few. In order to preserve and build on this progress we must work together—advocates, citizens, businesses, legislators and communities—to ensure children are a priority on the policy agenda.”

The 2014 KIDS COUNT Data Book is available online at www.aecf.org.

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NC Child is a nonpartisan organization dedicated to advancing public policies that improve the lives of North Carolina children. NC Child works statewide to ensure that all children are healthy, safe, well-educated, and economically secure by engaging communities and informing and influencing decision-makers. For more information, visit www.ncchild.org.