

News Release

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OK Kids Make Smart Choices in Health and Education Despite Growing Economic Instability

2016 KIDS COUNT Data Book ranks OK 37th best state for children, up two places from 2015

OKLAHOMA CITY –Oklahoma's Generation Z teenagers – the rising cohort that follows the Millennials – made significant gains in education and health indicators despite growing up in the midst of the economic downturn, according to the 2016 *KIDS COUNT® Data Book* from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Aided by advantageous federal, state and local policies and investments in prevention, teens in record numbers have seemingly avoided obstacles that could have derailed their future prospects. Comparing data between 2008 and 2014, teen birth rates fell 40 percent, drug and alcohol abuse dropped 38 percent, and the percent of teens graduating not on time decreased by 28 percent. In Oklahoma, the teen birth rate has fallen by one-third (33 percent) since 2008 and the percent of teens abusing drugs and alcohol has dropped 43 percent.

"This positive movement is the result of the good work in many Oklahoma communities and tribes that have made children and youth a priority and have invested resources in effective ways that improve the odds for kids," said Sharon Rodine, Youth Initiatives Director at the Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy. "Also, a lot of credit goes to the youths themselves, who can be very effective prevention messengers for their peers when provided the information, support and opportunities to do so."

Although Oklahoma has improved in overall child well-being, moving up two spots from 39th to 37th, children in the state continue to face tough economic conditions, with nearly one out of four of our state's children living in poverty.

"Over one-quarter of Oklahoma's children struggle with food insecurity. That means in a classroom of 20, at least five of those students are trying to learn on an empty stomach," says Lani Habrock, director of Oklahoma KIDS COUNT.

"Oklahoma has improved in the national rankings, but we are facing an extreme budget crisis," says Terry Smith, CEO of Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy. "Services to children and families are being cut. Public and private organizations must work together to continue to improve outcomes for Oklahoma's children."

Bipartisan solutions based on American values

In the *Data Book*, the Casey Foundation offers a number of recommendations for how policy makers can ensure all children are prepared for the future, based on this country's shared values of opportunity, responsibility and security.

OPPORTUNITY: Increase opportunity by expanding access to high-quality Pre-K and early childhood services so that all children are prepared to succeed in school. In addition, expand access to higher education and training so that every low-income child has a fair chance to develop his or her potential.

RESPONSIBILITY: Increase the Earned Income Tax Credit for low-income workers who do not have dependent children. This strategy will bolster workers, who may in fact be helping to support children who do not live with them and who are struggling to get by on low wages.

SECURITY: Policies can ensure American families have a measure of security, particularly low-income parents of young children, by providing paid family leave that helps them balance their obligations at home and in the workplace.

The 2016 *Data Book* will be available June 21 at 12:01 a.m. EDT at www.aecf.org.

Additional information is available at <http://datacenter.kidscount.org>, which also contains the most recent national, state and local data on hundreds of indicators of child well-being. The Data Center allows users to create rankings, maps and graphs for use in publications and on websites, and to view real-time information on mobile devices.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation creates a brighter future for the nation's children by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling communities into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow. For more information, visit www.aecf.org.

To learn more about Oklahoma's standing on childhood well-being, please contact

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The Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy's mission is to create awareness, take action and change policy to improve the health, safety and well-being of Oklahoma's children. OICA has remained vigilant to that mission, fighting for policies that improve the lives of children and families by being their voice at the State Capitol and in the communities where they live and learn. For three decades, the Institute has informed and educated state policymakers and other citizens on the importance of investing wisely in children and families.

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healthier places to live, work and grow. For more information, visit www.aecf.org. KIDS COUNT® is a registered trademark of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.