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West Virginia Improves from 43rd to 39th in the Nation in Overall Child Well-Being; Now Ties for Third Best in Nation for Percent of Children Covered by Health Insurance

One of Six States with Second Largest Improvement Since 2015 KIDS COUNT Data Book; However, State's Education System Still Ranks Poorly at 46th

Charleston, W. Va. – West Virginia has improved four places in the Annie E. Casey Foundation's 2016 national rankings of child well-being, going from 43rd to 39th in the nation in just one year. West Virginia now ties for third best in the nation in terms of the percent of children covered by health insurance. The state's best rankings can be seen in the Economic Well-being (31) and Family and Community domains (33). However, the state continues to be in the bottom ten in the Casey Foundation's Education (46) and Health (41) domains.

"This dramatic overall improvement in just one year's time shows that, when West Virginia invests in the policies that improve kids' lives, big changes are possible," said Laura Gandee, interim executive director of West Virginia KIDS COUNT. "Our belief that dramatic, positive changes are possible is the driving force behind KIDS COUNT's *Race2Great* campaign. **In fact, we believe that, if West Virginia focuses on implementing four key policies over the next five years, we can make our state a top 20 place to be a kid by 2025.**"

The four WV KIDS COUNT *Race2Great* policy pillars are an **Earned Income Tax Credit** for working families; high-quality **pre-school for all three-year-olds**; a **significant increase in the tobacco tax** to reduce pregnancy smoking and low birth-weight babies; and **statewide implementation of the state's health and sex education curriculum** to reduce teen pregnancies. Gandee added, "If advocates, communities, and policymakers join forces and focus on implementing these four simple polices, we can make West Virginia a great place for **every** child, very soon."

According to the 2016 *KIDS COUNT*[®] *Data Book* from the [Annie. E. Casey Foundation](#), the teenagers of Generation Z – the rising cohort that follows the Millennials – broke records in education and health indicators despite growing up in the midst of the economic downturn.

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 2007/ 2008 and 2014, teen birth rates fell 40 percent, the percentage of teens who abused drugs and alcohol dropped 38 percent, and the percentage of teens not graduating on time decreased by 28 percent. **In West Virginia, the teen birth rate dropped 21 percent and the percentage of teens graduating on time increased by 17 percent.**

Nonetheless, despite rising employment numbers, 22 percent of children nationally lived in poverty in 2014—the same percent as in 2013. **In West Virginia, 25 percent of kids lived in poverty.** Since 2008, the number of children living in high poverty areas skyrocketed to 14 percent nationally. In West Virginia, it remains at 8 percent, the same as it was in 2008. Nationally, almost one in three children live in families where no member of the household has full-time, year-round employment. **In West Virginia, this number is 36 percent of children, a percentage that has increased by 13 percent since 2008.**

“This generation of teenagers and young adults are coming of age in the wake of the worst economic climate in nearly 80 years, and yet they are achieving key milestones that are critical for future success,” said Patrick McCarthy, president and CEO of the Casey Foundation. “With more young people making smarter decisions, we must fulfill our part of the bargain, by providing them with the educational and economic opportunity that youth deserve. We urge candidates in state and national campaigns to describe in depth their proposals to help these determined young people realize their full potential.”

Since 2008, the percentage of teens abusing drugs and alcohol abuse has declined by double digits in every state except Louisiana and the District of Columbia; in 11 states it fell by 40 percent or more. The teen birth rate fell by more than 20 percent since 2008 in all but one state, North Dakota, where it fell by 14 percent. **Child and teen death rates fell in all states except two, Utah and West Virginia, with a 66 percent drop in the District of Columbia.** Only three states did not see a positive change in the number of high school kids not graduating on time, with Nebraska and D.C. seeing a more than 50 percent decrease.

Yet despite their increasingly responsible choices, Generation Z teens growing up in low- to moderate-income households have fewer opportunities for raising their standard of living compared to adults in the previous two generations. The cost of post-secondary education has become prohibitive due to rising tuition and a shift in financial aid away from needs-based grants to loans. Among recent high school graduates, the unemployment rate was 28 percent for blacks, 17 percent for Latinos and 15 percent for whites. Those with jobs earned, on average, \$10.66 an hour, which was less than wages in 2000 when adjusted for inflation.

“With rising higher education costs, stagnant wages and a flimsy social safety net, teens are less likely than their parents or grandparents to obtain economic security,” continued McCarthy. “For the sake of our economy and our society, we must reverse this trend to ensure

that today's youth – who will be the next generation of workers, parents and community leaders – have a successful transition to adulthood and beyond.”

Key trends include gains in health insurance but stagnating poverty and racial inequity

The 2016 *Data Book*, which focuses on key trends in child well-being in the post-recession years, measures child well-being in four domains: economic well-being, education, health, and family and community.

The rates of health insurance for all children improved by 40 percent since 2008, with some states recording increases of more than 60 percent. State health insurance covered close to an additional three million children.

African-American children were twice as likely as the average child to live in high-poverty neighborhoods and to live in single-parent families. American Indian children were twice as likely to lack health insurance coverage, and Latino children were the least likely to live with a household head who has at least a high school diploma. On a positive note, African-American children were more likely than the national average to have health insurance coverage, attend pre-school and Pre-K, and live in families where the household head had at least a high school diploma.

“Generation Z is the most diverse yet, and children of color are already the majority in 12 states. By the end of the decade, children of color will be the majority of all children in the United States,” says Laura Speer, associate director for policy reform and advocacy. “Our shared future depends on today's young people fulfilling their potential.”

National and State Rankings for the 2016 *Data Book*

For the second year in a row, a non-New England state ranks number one for overall child well-being. Minnesota holds the top spot, followed by Massachusetts, Iowa, New Hampshire and Connecticut, a newcomer to the top five. Mississippi remains the lowest ranked, with New Mexico, Louisiana, Nevada and newcomer Alabama rounding out the bottom five. Other state highlights:

- The top five states in economic well-being are in the heartland and Plain States regions — Wyoming, North Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa and Nebraska.
- **The biggest improvements in overall rankings compared to last year's *Data Book* are in Montana, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Washington, West Virginia and Wyoming.**
- The biggest drops in overall rankings are in Alaska, Maine, Maryland and Kansas.
- Arkansas, Florida and Wyoming fell to the lowest five rankings in health, accompanying Mississippi and Louisiana.

Bipartisan solutions based on American values

The Casey Foundation offers a number of recommendations based on 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.

West Virginia KIDS COUNT is determined to make West Virginia a great place to be a kid. The organization is widely recognized as the most trusted source of data about the well-being of WV's kids and a successful builder of alliances that advocate for the policies kids need to reach their full potential.

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. KIDS COUNT® is a registered trademark of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

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