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**2017 KIDS COUNT® Data Book Reveals Gains in Health and Continued Challenges in Economic Well-being  
Kentucky Ranks 34th in Child Well-being in the U.S.**

**JEFFERSONTOWN, KY June 13, 2017** – Kentucky ranks 34<sup>th</sup> in the nation in overall child well-being, according to the *2017 KIDS COUNT® Data Book*, released today by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The *2017 Kentucky KIDS COUNT County Data Book*, which includes county-level data, will be released in November.

“Every year, the *Data Book* offers us a clear choice,” said Dr. Terry Brooks, executive director of Kentucky Youth Advocates. “Do we accept mediocrity for the Commonwealth’s children? Are we content with being a bottom half state? Or do citizens and elected leaders look at the data, craft solutions, and invent a better future for our children and youth?”

**Notable findings include continued gains in health and challenges in economic well-being**

**39<sup>th</sup> in Economic Well-being:** Poverty remains the most persistent challenge for children in the Commonwealth, with more than one in four children living below the poverty line. Kentucky has 34 percent of kids living in families where neither parent has full-time, year-round employment. Kentucky also has nine percent of teens age 16 to 19 not attending school nor employed.

“We know that economic well-being drives every other aspect of this report. Unless and until we get serious about changing the trajectory of poverty for kids, we will not see substantial change. While we must battle a tradition of poverty in this state, we don’t have to shrug our shoulders,” said Dr. Brooks.

“Too many Kentucky kids continue to live in poverty,” said Mike Hammons, senior director of advocacy at Children, Inc. “Adopting a state refundable Earned Income Tax Credit and expanding access to child care subsidies would help low-income working parents keep more of their hard-earned income. And, when looking at the increasing number of kinship families across Kentucky, we can do a lot more to support them in caring for our most vulnerable. When parents and caregivers can provide for their families, kids and communities thrive.”

**22<sup>nd</sup> in Health:** Kids’ health coverage continues to be a bright spot for Kentucky. Ninety-six percent of Kentucky children are enrolled in health coverage, up from 94 percent in 2013.

“We know that the health policy arena is filled with challenges, but we also know that Kentucky’s kids have benefited from significant improvements in this arena. We cannot let national partisanship slow or reverse those wins, especially the critical gains in access to quality care,” said Dr. Brooks.



New data on healthy birthweights, which is vital for a strong start in life, also reveals improvements for Kentucky kids; the percentage of low-birthweight babies has slowly fallen to 8.7 percent. But Kentucky can do much more to provide a strong start for all babies.

“Smoking during pregnancy accounts for as many as 30 percent of low-birthweight babies,” said Ben Chandler, president and CEO of the Foundation for a Healthy Kentucky. “The Foundation is committed to ensuring healthier infants by working with advocates and local communities to promote smoke-free ordinances, ensuring that expectant mothers have easy access to effective tobacco treatment, and raising the state tax on cigarettes. Each of these strategies will reduce Kentucky’s high smoking rate. We must get serious about protecting our children from the harmful effects of tobacco.”

**24<sup>th</sup> in Education:** The Commonwealth ranks in the top half of states in this domain, yet three out of five fourth graders scored below proficient in reading, nearly three in four eighth graders scored below proficient in math, and 60 percent of children ages three and four are not attending school. However, Kentucky is now ranked 6<sup>th</sup> in the nation for high school graduation with only 12 percent of students not graduating on time.

“We can look at this data and seize complacency or we can celebrate progress and embrace the need for Kentucky kids to become internationally competitive. A stronger focus on career and technical education, the new potential for innovative public charter schools, differentiated career ladders for teachers, and the newly created school accountability system from Senate Bill 1, championed by Senator Mike Wilson, are all hopeful indicators that the best days for Kentucky schoolhouses are on the horizon,” said Dr. Brooks.

**38<sup>th</sup> in Family and Community:** Though Kentucky’s teen birth rate is still one of the highest in the nation, it fell by 30 percent from 2010 to 2015. Sixteen percent of children live in high-poverty areas (neighborhoods where more than 30 percent of residents live in poverty). In these areas of concentrated poverty, all kids, even those from higher income families, face challenges.

“At Partners for Education, we know data is essential to understanding the forces limiting the success of youth in our communities,” said Dreama Gentry, executive director of Partners for Education at Berea College.

“Access to good data allows us to create innovative programs that help Appalachian Kentucky youth succeed in school. For example, data showed a need to create pathways to high school graduation for families where the primary caregiver is under age 24, and it suggested that providing high quality early childhood experiences for the children was key. This data led us to create two-generation programming that impacts both the parent and the child.”

Kentucky needs common-ground solutions on the federal, state, and local levels that will help kids and families, boost local economies, and strengthen the state budget:

- To continue child health gains in Kentucky, reauthorization of the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) at the federal level is imperative. In Frankfort, leaders must ensure any healthcare changes recognize that covering parents is key to meeting children’s physical, behavioral, and oral health needs.
- Implement proven strategies, such as local smoke-free laws and a significant increase to Kentucky’s low tobacco tax, to reduce smoking during pregnancy and the number of babies born at low birthweight.
- A refundable state Earned Income Tax Credit, microenterprise zones that promote entrepreneurship in communities with limited economic opportunity, and expanded supports for child care would help

lower-income working parents cover basic needs for their children while reinvesting money in their local economy.

- Investment in child welfare programs that keep family together, like family preservation programs and reinstating the Kinship Care Program, would help Kentucky's most vulnerable children who have experienced abuse or neglect.

"Without fundamental improvement in lifting kids out of poverty, we face a losing battle on improving education outcomes, safety, and our children's health. Solutions abound and we are calling on the Governor and the General Assembly to build a budget for children in 2018," said Dr. Brooks.

#### **Release Information**

The *2017 KIDS COUNT Data Book* will be available June 13<sup>th</sup> at 12:01 a.m. EDT at [www.aecf.org/databook](http://www.aecf.org/databook). Journalists interested in creating maps, graphs, and rankings in stories about the *Data Book* can use the KIDS COUNT Data Center at [www.datacenter.kidscount.org](http://www.datacenter.kidscount.org).

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#### **About Kentucky Youth Advocates**

*Kentucky Youth Advocates believes all children deserve to be safe, healthy, and secure. As THE independent voice for Kentucky's children, we work to ensure policymakers create investments and policies that are good for children.*

#### **About the Annie E. Casey Foundation**

*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](http://www.aecf.org). KIDS COUNT® is a registered trademark of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.*