



The Independent Voice for Kentucky's Children

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Contact:

Tara Grieshop-Goodwin
Office: 502-895-8167 x118
Cell: 502-558-4090

Terry Brooks
Office: 502-895-8167 x113
Cell: 502-235-2396

**Juvenile Justice System Needs Urgent Reform
Kentucky Slips to 41st in KIDS COUNT Ranking of Child Well-Being**

Louisville, KY – New approaches to reform of the juvenile justice system are urgently needed in the U.S. according to the 2008 national *KIDS COUNT Data Book*, released today by Kentucky Youth Advocates and the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The annual publication ranks states on ten key indicators of child well-being. Kentucky slipped to 41st in the nation, one spot below 2007's ranking.

In its opening essay, the book takes an in depth look at the juvenile justice system and identifies a road map for reform. Over the past twenty years, scholars have developed a large body of research about the causes of juvenile delinquency and approaches to juvenile reform that hurt rather than help. It highlights promising new approaches to detention reform that increase opportunities for positive youth development.

“Kentucky has moved towards harsher penalties for young people charged with offenses, and it is time to step back and evaluate how effective that move has been,” says Terry Brooks, executive director of Kentucky Youth Advocates. “We are second in the nation for locking kids up for offenses that would not be a crime if committed by an adult. From a moral perspective, that kind of unfairness is wrong. From a research perspective, it is more than ineffective; it is actually harmful to our youth. From a policy perspective, it is an imperative that demands change on an immediate basis.”

The essay challenges states to evaluate and take action to improve the juvenile justice system, heeding these six crucial lessons:

1. Research shows that youth brain structure is different from adults, calling for different treatment.
2. Society's tendency to incarcerate juveniles is ineffective and expensive.
3. Families play critical roles in helping to resolve juvenile delinquency.
4. Pulling kids into the juvenile justice system for minor cases harms youth with no benefit to public safety.
5. Juvenile justice systems have too often become dumping grounds for youth who should be served by other public systems (i.e. mental health, foster care, special education.)
6. The system fosters racial disparity and unequal treatment.

The essay offers a number of solutions to address systemic problems including introducing developmentally appropriate interventions, increasing effective community-based services, reducing inappropriate and unnecessary detention and incarceration, working to empower and strengthen families to help youth, and being intentional about reducing racial disparities.

"Racial disparities is an obvious place to begin improving Kentucky's juvenile justice system," says Tara Grieshop-Goodwin, deputy director of Kentucky Youth Advocates. "Even when charged with the same offense and with similar histories of involvement with the juvenile justice system, youth of color are less likely to get diversion and more likely to be committed to the custody of the department of juvenile justice."

The data book reveals that Kentucky improved on four of the 10 measures of child well-being but experienced six setbacks since 2000. Kentucky saw progress in its infant mortality rate, teen birth rate, and high school dropout rates.

Kentucky continues to outpace national improvement on infant mortality, improving by 8 percent to rank 21st (compared to its ranking of 27 last year). Following positive national trends, the teen birth and high school dropout rates decreased by 10 and 11 percent, respectively.

The Commonwealth showed the biggest improvement in its percent of youth aged 16-19 who are not in school and not working. From 2000 to 2006, the percentage decreased from 12 percent to 10 percent; however, Kentucky continues to rank in the bottom ten on this indicator at 43rd in the nation.

Kentucky continues on a downward trend with economic indicators. The percentage of children living in families without secure employment (meaning no parent worked full-time, year-round) increased by 9 percent. The state also saw a 5 percent increase in the percentage of children living in poverty (income below \$20,444 for a two-parent, two-child family in 2006), and a 10 percent increase in the percent of children living in single-parent families.

Kentucky is also moving in the wrong direction on low-weight births and child death. “Kentucky, and nearly every county across the state, has a very high rate of pregnant women who smoke,” says Brooks. “We know that exposure to cigarette smoke is the single most important known cause of low-weight births, which not only increases the risk of poor outcomes in health and even education, but also increases health care costs at birth. The General Assembly missed an excellent chance to address this with an increase in the cigarette tax.”

“On a positive note, the General Assembly has taken huge steps towards moving the direction on our child and teen death rates with the passage of a booster seat law this year and a stronger teen driving law in 2005,” says Grieshop-Goodwin. “We’re already seeing fewer deaths with the teen driving law. With motor vehicle crashes as the number one cause of child death, we expect the use of booster seats to keep more children from accidental death in Kentucky as well.”

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Kentucky Youth Advocates is a non-partisan, non-profit, children's advocacy organization. KYA represents a voice for Kentucky's most precious asset – its youth. We believe that Kentucky's youth deserve the opportunities and resources necessary to ensure their productive development and health.