

For close to two decades, the Kentucky KIDS COUNT project has presented county-level information on how children are faring in Kentucky, with the understanding that childhood experiences have clear impacts on adulthood. That important period of development, from birth to age 18, shapes futures for individuals but also for our state. While we know that the first three years of life are critical for brain development, we also know that the school-aged years are critical times to develop civic and community connections.

Research shows that civic knowledge and community involvement are declining in the United States, as evidenced by poor voting rates amongst young adults. New findings indicate adults with low levels of engagement were once youth similarly detached from the community. In fact, studies suggest that the greatest predictor of an individual's civic non-involvement is past non-involvement.

Over the past year, Kentucky Youth Advocates has developed several initiatives, to actively engage youth in learning what the KIDS COUNT data shows for their community and to get them involved in advocating for needed change. We worked with middle and high school students in Harlan and Jefferson Counties to critically evaluate the data and identify specific statewide policies that could make a positive difference.

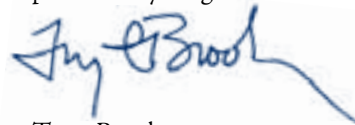
The students translated that analysis into heartfelt and informed speeches to release the 2007 KIDS COUNT book in Louisville in November 2007 and lead a rally of more than 400 advocates in the Capitol Rotunda at the annual Children's Advocacy Day in Frankfort in February 2008.

At Children's Advocacy Day, they met with their legislators, but rather than talking about their favorite subject or what sports they play, the youth brought issues and solutions to policymakers on how to make Kentucky a better place to be young.

Reflected one youth from Harlan, "Participating in this event was the most meaningful thing I have ever done in my leadership class for the past four years that I have been in it. Going to Frankfort and speaking with our legislators was more than just a chance to get out of school. It was a unique experience for all of us not only to tour the Capitol, but to participate in a working government . . . [and] take part in governing our future."

In celebration of their great achievements and our commitment to continue engaging youth in finding their voices and speaking for themselves, we chose to feature last year's youth participants on the cover and section divider pages of this year's KIDS COUNT book. The photos feature the youth in action, leading the rally at Children's Advocacy Day, talking to the media, touring the Capitol, and meeting with their legislators.

We hope you will feel as we did — inspired by their engagement to work to ensure all youth in Kentucky have the opportunities they need to lead Kentucky forward. We invite you to use this book in a similar way — to engage youth in your community in identifying areas of concern and getting involved in making Kentucky the best place to be young.



Terry Brooks
Executive Director



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