



The Independent Voice for Kentucky's Children

KENTUCKY  
YOUTH  
ADVOCATES

**For Immediate Release**

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**Kentucky Remains 41<sup>st</sup> in KIDS COUNT Ranking of Child Well-Being  
Foundation Calls for “Data Reform” at a National, State and Local Level**

**Louisville, KY** – For the second year in a row Kentucky ranks 41<sup>st</sup> in the nation in over-all child well-being according to the national 2009 KIDS COUNT Data Book, released today by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The annual publication uses the best available data to measure the educational, social, economic, and physical well-being of children in each state. This year marks the 20th edition of the book.

Since 2000, Kentucky has improved on four indicators, including: child death rate, teen death rate, percent of teens who are high school dropouts, and percent of teens not attending school and not working. For instance, the percent of teens who are high school dropouts saw a 20 percent improvement between 2000 and 2007, following national trends of improvement. However Kentucky still ranks 36<sup>th</sup> on this indicator.

“While we are sending the message to Kentucky youth that it is critical for their future to finish high school, we allow 16-year olds to legally drop out, sending a very mixed message about our priorities” said Terry Brooks, executive director of Kentucky Youth Advocates. “Not only should we require students under 18 to stay in school until graduation, but we should give them the opportunity to creatively pursue their future goals by allowing flexible class scheduling to accommodate employment or college classes, or by allowing early graduation to begin postsecondary education.”

Kentucky remained the same on the teen birth rate indicator, and worsened on five indicators, including: percent of low-birthweight babies, infant mortality rate, percent of

children living in poverty, percent of children living in single-parent families, and percent of children living in families where no parent has full time, year-round employment.

The percent of children living in families where no parent has full time, year-round employment worsened by 12 percent, far more than the national decline of three percent. The data, which was gathered in 2007, represents a snapshot of Kentucky before the recession, meaning that this indicator will likely get worse.

“Economic stressors, such as unemployment, can have a real impact on families,” said Brooks. “We see incidents of child abuse increase as over-stressed families struggle to make ends meet. At the same time that the need for social supports such as child abuse prevention are increasing, our state budget is facing severe shortfalls that threaten these services. For instance, family preservation programs are proven to prevent further abuse and keep children out of foster care, yet these programs have suffered cuts in order to balance the budget. Our leaders must work towards comprehensive tax reform to protect the programs and services that keep families strong during this economic crisis.”

This year’s opening essay in the Data Book underscores the importance of collecting data on child well-being as a way of holding ourselves accountable for how well we address pressing needs and create meaningful opportunities for vulnerable children. It states that while we have made progress in data collection in the past 20 years, our nation, states and communities still suffer from a “persisting inattention to results in many services and systems designed to assist children and families, and an unfortunate array of missed opportunities to improve outcomes through better use of information and technology.” For example, while we know that childhood obesity is a particular problem in Kentucky and one that is critical to the state’s future health, we still have no reliable source of county-level data on that indicator.

The essay highlights the effectiveness of “data-driven advocacy” and recognizes a Kentucky example in which legislators took action in response to data presented in a 2003 issue brief by Kentucky Youth Advocates on dental care for children. The publication revealed half of Kentucky’s 2- to 4-year-olds had untreated cavities and two-thirds of children covered by government funded health insurance were not receiving dental care. The report, plus a follow-up publication in 2005, paved the way for increased

reimbursement rates for dentists serving low-income patients and expanded benefits to include two cleanings per year instead of one in 2006. The Kentucky legislature also began requiring dental screenings or exams for every child enrolling in public schools in 2008.

“Timely and accurate data collection is essential for policymakers to have an accurate picture of the strengths of and challenges facing Kentucky children and families,” says Brooks. “Improving data collection as a state will enhance our capacity to invest tax dollars wisely in needed areas.”

View the National 2009 KIDS COUNT Data Book online at <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/databook/2009>.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation will hold a **media webinar** to release the data book and essay, “Counting What Counts” and demonstrate the new KIDS COUNT Data Center today from **12:00 p.m. – 1:15 p.m. EDT**. To register go to <http://bit.ly/xbjgu>.

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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.