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SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH CENTER

Press Release
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2009 KIDS COUNT National Data Book

Gains and Setbacks in Mississippi Point to the Need for Accurate and Objective Data to Guide State Efforts in Addressing the Needs of Children and Families

Mississippi State, MS –The environments that children grow up in (i.e., their neighborhood, school, home, etc.) affect their development in tangible ways.

Children who grow up in environments that are healthy, safe, educational and economically secure have the best opportunity for optimal development, which allows them, as adults, to fully participate in society and contribute to the economy that we all depend on.

The 20th annual *KIDS COUNT Data Book* provides information on the needs and conditions of America's children and families. The Data Book presents data for the nation as a whole and also for each state individually to determine the degree to which children and families benefit from and are supported by the environments in which they live.

In addition, this year's Data Book essay, "Counting What Counts," looks at the country's progress in keeping track of children's well-being through the collection, analysis and dissemination of accurate and objective data.

The use of accurate and objective data allows leaders and stakeholders to 1) better understand the types of environments that produce the best or worst outcomes for citizens, 2) target areas most in need, 3) and apply the most effective solutions to social problems.

The KIDS COUNT Data Book highlights 10 key measures, or indicators, affecting child well-being, so each state can determine how they are doing compared to other states and the nation as a whole. Data for the state of Mississippi reveal that trends in child well-being have improved for some indicators and worsened for others since 2000:

- Mississippi's six areas that have improved include the following: infant mortality rate; child death rate; teen death rate; teen birth rate; percentage of teens who are high school dropouts; percentage of teens not attending school and not working.
- Mississippi's four areas that have worsened include the following: percentage of low-birthweight babies; percentage of children living in poverty; percentage of children living in single-parent families; percentage of children living in families where no parent has full-time, year round employment.

Among the more promising findings for Mississippi, the child death rate improved from 2000 to 2006, which was consistent with national trends. Mississippi ranks 47th among the 50 states on this measure, a slight improvement over its last place ranking in the early years of the decade.

In addition, the percentage of Mississippi teens ages 16 to 19 who were high school dropouts fell to 8% in 2007, the state's lowest percentage this decade. Mississippi ranks 36th nationally on this measure.

“It is encouraging to see the reduction in teenage dropouts in our state. This improvement is so important because educational attainment makes such a huge difference in the quality of life for families and children. I am confident that the local and statewide efforts now underway to provide support and encouragement for students to stay in school will continue to have a positive impact,” said Mike Clayborne, President, CREATE Foundation Inc.

Some problems remain consistent and pervasive, however. Among the 50 states, Mississippi has consistently ranked last in the percentage of low-birthweight babies for each year from 2000 to 2006.

Furthermore, the percentage of children in Mississippi living in families where no parent had full-time, year-round employment increased to 43% in 2007—well above the national average of 33%.

“Until we in Mississippi...[are] willing to make the necessary investment and sacrifices in education and health to improve the overall well-being of all our citizens, we will remain last,” remarked Dr. J. Edward Hill, Past President of the American Medical Association

In order for states to make improvements in data collection, analysis and dissemination that can ultimately yield better policy and advocacy on behalf of children and families, the Annie E. Casey Foundation offers several recommendations.

They suggest that state and local governments create stronger administrative databases, improve data analysis, promote data-driven practice improvements, and expand the use of new information technologies. They also encourage child advocates and other concerned leaders to use data-driven advocacy to target their efforts.

“It is more critical now than ever to have accurate data that show how American families are faring in the current economic downturn and have systems that are equipped to use this information to improve the well-being of those children and families most in need.” –Excerpt from the KIDS COUNT Data Book Essay

This year's Data Book is complemented by the expanded KIDS COUNT Data Center that contains hundreds of measures of child well-being covering national, state, county, and city information. To access information for Mississippi go to datacenter.kidscount.org/ms.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization, whose primary mission is to foster public policies, human-service reforms, and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today's vulnerable children and families. For more information, visit www.aecf.org.

Since January 2006, the Mississippi KIDS COUNT program has been housed at Mississippi State University's Social Science Research Center, Family & Children Research Unit. For more information and the MS KIDS COUNT 2008 Data Book, please visit our Web site: <http://www.ssrc.msstate.edu/mskidscount/>