National Report Highlights Troubling Trends for Illinois Children

CHICAGO – Indicators of child well-being in Illinois show some signs of improvement in education and health, but the nation’s prolonged economic crisis continues to have a negative impact on children, according to new data from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The 2013 KIDS COUNT Data Book identifies three troubling trends: the lingering effects of the recession on employment; growing disparities in well-being between low-income children and their middle-class and more affluent peers; and the disproportionate effects of these negative trends on young children.

Lingering Effects of the Recession

In 2011, more than 30 percent of Illinois children lived in families where no parent had full-time, year-round employment. In addition, 12 percent of Illinois children had at least one unemployed parent — the highest rate in the Midwest.

Child poverty has continued to increase. In 2011, 22 percent of Illinois children lived in poverty, up from 17 percent in 2006. (In 2011, the federal poverty level for a family of four with two children was about $22,800.)

The number of children in low-income households (those with incomes below 200 percent of poverty level) has likewise increased. The proportion of low-income children in Illinois rose from 36 percent in 2006 to 43 percent in 2011.

Disparities in Education

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) shows that reading achievement among Illinois children at the beginning of 4th grade has improved only modestly in recent years. More alarming are the wide achievement gaps among student groups. In 2011, 4th grade reading scores for low-income students in Illinois were lowest in the Midwest and second lowest among the nation’s 10 most populous states.

Gaylord Gieseke, president of Voices for Illinois Children, emphasized the significance of these findings: “In 3rd and 4th grades, children make an important transition in school — from learning to read to reading to learn. Children who can master this shift are more likely to be successful in school and in adult life.”

The KIDS COUNT Data Book also indicates that high school graduation rates in Illinois have changed
very little since 2006. The most recent data from the Illinois State Board of Education shows that in 2012, the graduation rate for low-income students was only 73 percent, compared with 82 percent for all students statewide.

These findings are especially disturbing in the context of the erosion of state investments in education over the past several years. Nearly half of all students in Illinois public schools come from low-income households. The *Illinois Kids Count 2013 report* shows that many school districts across the state have low-income student populations above 75 percent.

**Impact on Young Children**


According to Gieseke, "We know that growing up in poverty, especially in early childhood, can harm children’s health, their cognitive and social-emotional development, and their economic opportunities as adults."

Both the Casey Foundation and Voices for Illinois Children have long emphasized the critical importance of early learning opportunities, especially for children in poverty. Until recently, Illinois was a leader among states in expanding access to preschool, but the Great Recession and the state fiscal crisis have seriously eroded those gains.

The 2013 *KIDS COUNT Data Book* calls for smart investments that focus on strategies with evidence of high return in child well-being and healthy development. Such investments should involve weaving together programs that support new parents — such as home visiting programs — with high-quality early childhood and prekindergarten programs that ensure every child enters school ready to learn.

The *KIDS COUNT Data Book* features the latest data on child well-being for every state, the District of Columbia, and the nation. This information is available in the newly redesigned *KIDS COUNT Data Center*, which also contains the most recent national, state and local data on hundreds of measures of child well-being. Data Center users can create rankings, maps and graphs for use in publications and on websites, and view real-time information on mobile devices.

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*Voices for Illinois Children is a champion for the full development of every child in the state, working with families, communities, and policymakers on child-related issues. Voices Kids Count work is part of a nationwide network of state-level projects supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. For the most recent Illinois Kids Count report, "Moving Policy, Making Progress," visit [www.voices4kids.org](http://www.voices4kids.org).*