Massachusetts Third in Nation for Child Well-Being

Challenges Persist

Boston — Children in Massachusetts lead the nation in educational achievement, and are at or near the top in a number of measures of health, according to the Annie E. Casey Foundation's 2013 KIDS COUNT® Data Book. In other areas, children in Massachusetts continue to face some significant hurdles.

- Although Massachusetts's child poverty rate is relatively low compared to other states, one in six kids under five is currently living in poverty—roughly 75,000 young children.

- Massachusetts's overall ranking for Child Health fell from 3rd to 11th, in large part because our rank on teen drug and alcohol abuse is poor and declining.

In education, our 4th-graders have the highest rate of reading proficiency in the nation, and our 8th-graders the highest rate of math proficiency.

"The long-term investments we began to make in our schools in the 1990s are paying off, but too many of our kids are not yet getting the support they need to have a real opportunity to succeed." said Noah Berger, president of MassBudget, the KIDS COUNT group in Massachusetts. "For example, half of our 4th graders are still not reading proficiently – and we know that early reading success is crucial to the ability of a child to succeed in school. Focusing on what it takes to give every child an opportunity to succeed is crucial not just for those kids, but also for our state's ability to build a strong, high wage economy."

Looking at the country as a whole, the 2013 Data Book found that America’s children are showing some signs of improvement despite an ever-growing poverty rate. Children continue to progress in education and health but have gained only incremental steps in their economic well-being since 2010, falling short of where they stood before the recession.

From roughly 2005 to 2011, the teen birth rate dropped by 15 percent to a historic low (in Massachusetts, the decline in teen births was even more dramatic—down 23% between 2005 and 2010); the rate of high school students not graduating in four years saw an almost 20 percent decline, as did the child and teen death rate; and the percentage of children without health insurance decreased by 30 percent.

Although the economic well-being of the nation’s children improved slightly from 2010 to 2011, the negative impact of the recession remains evident. In 2011, the child poverty rate stood at 23 percent, or 16.4 million children — an increase of 3 million since 2005. The number of children living in
households spending more than 30 percent of their income on housing — more than 29 million in 2011 — saw minor improvement from the previous year, but was still about 2 million more than in 2005. Similarly, the number of children whose parents lacked full-time, year-round employment was nearly 20 percent higher than in 2008.

The 2013 Data Book also examines how America’s youngest children are faring, adding to the ongoing national conversation on early childhood education. In particular, younger children are disproportionately affected by the lingering effects of the recession: The poverty rate among children younger than 3 is 26 percent; among 3- to 5-year-olds, it is 25 percent — higher than the national average for all kids.

"Children are our nation’s most precious resource, as well as our future leaders, employees, citizens and parents," said Patrick McCarthy, the Foundation’s president and CEO. "The early years of their lives are a critical juncture in their development. As our economic recovery continues, we cannot lose sight of doing whatever it takes to help kids, particularly kids in low-income families, reach their full potential — and that includes laying a solid foundation from the moment they are born."

“The progress we’re seeing in child health and education is encouraging, but the economic data clearly speak to the considerable challenges we still face,” said Laura Speer, the Casey Foundation's associate director for policy reform and data. “We need to do better and be smarter about investing in effective programs and services to help ensure all kids get the best possible start in life.”

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.

MassBudget's KIDS COUNT reports cover a range of issues affecting children in Massachusetts, including early education & care, homelessness policy, youth jobs, and public health. Our Children’s Budget contains clear descriptions and funding information for the many programs in the Massachusetts state budget that affect children. And the MassKidsCount.org group blog is a place for leading voices in child advocacy and public policy research to discuss issues affecting the well-being of children in Massachusetts.

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The Massachusetts Budget and Policy Center (MassBudget) produces policy research, analysis, and data-driven recommendations focused on improving the lives of low- and middle-income children and adults, strengthening our state’s economy, and enhancing the quality of life in Massachusetts.