MIXED REVIEWS ON THE WELL-BEING OF PUERTO RICO’S CHILDREN IN THE 2013 KIDS COUNT DATA BOOK

Low-birth-weight rates and preschool attendance improve, but Puerto Rico still has highest rates in U.S. of child poverty, parental unemployment and teen participation in school and workforce

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico—Education and health trends are bright spots in the 2013 KIDS COUNT Data Book released today by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, which shows welcomed decreases in uninsured children and teen birthrates nationwide. Puerto Rico’s improved outlook in these areas also include positive trends in low-birth-weight rates, stronger preschool attendance, and a larger number of heads of household who have a high school degree. Yet, the economic indicators for Puerto Rico are worse than for any other U.S. jurisdiction: 84 percent of children here live in high-poverty areas, which is seven times the national rate (12 percent).

“The economic outlook for Puerto Rico’s children continues to be of great concern, but we are encouraged to see that more children are getting a good start in life in terms of health and education,” said Nayda Rivera-Hernández, Senior Research Analyst at NCLR (National Council of La Raza), the Puerto Rico grantee in the foundation’s KIDS COUNT network.

“We are proud that Puerto Rico’s rate of preschool attendance is among the highest in the U.S. and are thrilled with the drop in uninsured children,” continued Rivera-Hernández. “But we cannot lose sight of the dire financial circumstances of their families; it is astounding to consider that 84 percent of children here live in high-poverty areas and that more than half of our children live in single-parent families and have parents who are not securely employed. This has an enormous impact on their prospects and the island’s future.”

A snapshot of Puerto Rico’s teen population shows they are stuck in a bleak no-man’s land, with a higher proportion of them neither in school nor at work. Key findings show:

- 16 percent of high school students have dropped out of school and are unemployed, which is double the rate nationwide (8 percent).

- 40 percent fail to graduate from high school in four years—up from 33 percent in last year’s Data Book—which places Puerto Rico in a last-place tie with the District of Columbia for on-time graduation rates among U.S. jurisdictions and is nearly double the national rate of 22 percent.
A teen birth rate of 51 per 1,000 female teenagers, well above the rate of 34 per 1,000 female teenagers for the U.S. overall.

Despite the troubling economic circumstances of Puerto Rico’s children, there were some positive trends. The 2013 KIDS COUNT Data Book documented improvements in three out of four health indicators for Puerto Rico: the percent of low-birth-weight babies is still higher here but declined slightly to 12.6 percent; the percent of children without health insurance went from 5 to 4 percent; and the rate of child and teen deaths fell in recent years, too. The portion of children not attending preschool dropped from 51 percent to 47 percent.

“Children must grow up healthy and have a good education if they are to be the resilient citizens, workers and leaders our nation needs. Puerto Rico is making gains in these areas that we hope will continue; however, the data released today certainly make the case for helping families improve their financial security and engaging teenagers to put them on the path to a productive future. Given the limited resources available today, these data can help policymakers consider where funding can most have an impact on children,” said Rivera-Hernández.

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. NCLR will release local data specific to the 78 municipios in Puerto Rico at the Fomentando Alianzas nonprofit conference held here today by the Fundación Banco Popular and will work to ensure that policymakers and government agencies in these areas have access to these statistics.

For further information or to schedule an interview about children’s well-being in Puerto Rico, please contact Nayda Rivera-Hernández at (787) 649-9501 or nrivera@nclr.org, or Kathy Mimberg at (202) 776-1714 or kmimberg@nclr.org. Also, updates on this issue are available via Twitter at @NCLR and @nayda4prkids.

NCLR—the largest national Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States—works to improve opportunities for Hispanic Americans. For more information on NCLR, please visit www.nclr.org or follow us on Facebook and Twitter.

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