Tennessee Ranks 39th in KIDS COUNT Child Well-Being Report

Tennessee is 39th in the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s 2013 national KIDS COUNT Data Book ranking of child well-being released today.

Rankings on 16 indicators are clustered in four domains — Economic Well-Being, Education, Health, and Family and Community. Tennessee improved slightly on two domains, held steady on one, and dropped on another.

“Child well-being is a barometer of the current and future well-being of the state,” said Linda O’Neal, executive director of the Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth, state affiliate of the KIDS COUNT program, “and while we are disappointed Tennessee’s 2013 composite ranking dropped from 36th in 2012 after three years of ‘best ever’ state rankings, we are pleased to see progress in several indicators.

“Emphasis on keeping children in school in Tennessee resulted in the state scoring better than the national average in the percent of high school students graduating on time and of children in families where the household head has a high school diploma.”
The state ranked 37th on both Economic Well-Being and Family and Community, better than its 2012 rankings. More than one in four children in Tennessee lives in poverty, and more than one in three lives in a family where no parent has full-time, year-round employment; a household spending more than 30 percent of its income on housing; and/or a single parent family.

Tennessee’s ranking on the Health domain, 33rd, was its best, even though the ranking reflected a drop from 16th last year. Although the state improved on all four Health indicators compared to the baseline year (low-birth weight babies, child and teen deaths, children without health insurance, and youth who reported abusing alcohol or drugs, Tennessee slipped a little on the last two indicators compared to the 2012 report. Although the percentage of low-birthweight babies and rate of child and teen deaths improved, the rankings for children without health insurance and youth who reported abusing drugs and alcohol worsened.

The report calls for smart investments, stating, “Although we will need to invest more in early childhood, we should focus our resources on strategies with evidence of high return in child well-being and healthy development. For example, we should weave together existing programs that support new parents...with high quality early childhood and prekindergarten programs that ensure every child enters school ready to learn.”

“Tennesseans have a responsibility to prepare for the future by providing the infrastructure of proven services and supports so children have opportunities to be safe, healthy, educated, nurtured and supported, and engaged in activities that lead to success in school and in life,” O’Neal added.

Although the state ranked 21st in the rate of students graduating from high school on time, Tennessee’s worst ranking was in the education domain at 42nd. Some of the state’s lowest rankings were in educational performance, as
three out of four fourth graders scored below proficient reading level and three out of four eighth graders scored below proficient math level.

The quality of the state’s prekindergarten standards have been recognized by national early education researchers, and it is clear that quality early childhood education improves outcomes for children. However, Tennessee ranks 37th in access to preschool, according to the report. Sixty percent of the state’s three- and four-year-olds are not attending preschool.

“Research indicates schools find it difficult to break the cycles of under-performance for children whose parents struggled in school and have been unable to achieve a level of education and employment sufficient to lift their families out of poverty,” O’Neal said, endorsing the report’s recommendation for strategies engaging two generations.

In conjunction with the release of the 23rd annual Data Book, the Annie E. Casey Foundation is rolling out an updated KIDS COUNT Data Center, which contains hundreds of measures of child well-being and allows users to create maps and graphs of the data at the national, state, county, and city level. To access information for Tennessee, go to http://datacenter.kidscount.org/tn. The Data Center has been enhanced with a new, user-friendly mobile site, accessible at http://mobile.kidscount.org.

The Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth is a small state agency created by the Tennessee General Assembly. Its primary mission is to advocate for improvements in the quality of life for Tennessee children and families. Partial funding for TCCY’s KIDS COUNT program is provided through a grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the nation’s largest philanthropy devoted exclusively to disadvantaged children.

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