Arkansas ranks 40th nationally in annual child well-being rankings

Health and education improve, although more children live in poverty

LITTLE ROCK – Arkansas edged up to 40th in the nation in the annual Annie E. Casey Foundation Kids Count Data Book rankings, showing improvements in child health and education indicators. Last year the state ranked 42nd. However, the numbers show that Arkansas children are actually worse off when it comes to their economic well-being and their family and community environment.

The Data Book looks at child well-being indicators in four areas: health; education; economic well-being; and family and community. Arkansas’s ranking this year was buoyed by strong numbers in health and education, showing once again that investments made by the state in those areas – through programs like Arkansas Better Chance pre-K, Medicaid, and ARKids First – pay off for the state’s children.

According to the rankings, the number of low-birthweight babies has gone down, as has the number of child and teen deaths. The number of uninsured children in Arkansas is only six percent (which is down from 22 percent when ARKids First began in 1997 – a significant decrease). The education rankings also show that more children are attending pre-K programs and the number of eighth graders who are proficient in math is on the rise. However, the number of fourth graders reading proficiently did not change and the number of students graduating from high school on time went down.

Health was the only area in which every indicator showed improvement. Children are worse off economically than previous years. More Arkansas children are living in poverty (28 percent), more children have parents who lack secure employment, and there are more children living in households with high housing cost burdens. We know that the more time a child spends in poverty, the more at risk they are in future years (for a listing of each indicator and whether the state has improved, worsened, or remained the same, click here).

“We’re showing a lot of improvements in health,” says Rich Huddleston, executive director of Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families. “This is no accident. Arkansas has really made an effort to make sure more and more kids get the health coverage they need by investing in programs like ARKids First, which is the state’s Medicaid program for low-income children. ARKids has provided insurance to children who needed it.”

Huddleston says investments in education have also paid off but the state needs to reaffirm its commitment, especially to early education.
“Funding for our high-quality pre-K programs aimed at at-risk kids has been flat since 2008,” he says. “The Data Book numbers show that the number of students who graduate high-school on time is decreasing. But we know one surefire way to improve educational outcomes, including graduation rates, is to make sure children have access to pre-K programs and to make sure they’re reading at grade level by the end of third grade.”

The numbers in Arkansas reflect a national trend. Across the country, children have made gains in education and health while experiencing setbacks in economic well-being. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, “the negative impact of the recession remains evident.” The national group also called for more investment in “effective programs and services to help ensure all kids get the best possible start in life.”

Arkansas numbers at a glance:

- 30th in Health (including number of low-birthweight babies; children without health insurance; child and teen deaths per 1,000; and teens who abuse drugs or alcohol)
- 36th in Education (including children not attending preschool; fourth graders not proficient in reading; eighth graders not proficient in math; and high school students not graduating on time)
- 39th in Economic Well-Being (including children in poverty; children whose parents lack secure employment; children living in households with a high housing cost burden; and teens not in school and not working)
- 45th in Family and Community (including children in single parent families; children in families where the household head lacks a high school diploma; children living in high poverty areas; and teen births per 1,000)

For a more complete list, click here.

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Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families is a statewide, non-profit child advocacy organization established in 1977. Our mission is to ensure that all children and their families have the resources and opportunities to lead healthy and productive lives and to realize their full potential.

INTERVIEW OPPORTUNITIES: AACF Executive Director Rich Huddleston will be available for comment. In Springdale, Northwest Arkansas director Laura Kellams will be available for interviews; she can be reached at (479) 927-9800 or (479) 445-8750 (cell).

Read the 2013 Kids Count Fact Sheet, with national info, here.

Read the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s national press release here.

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