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## 2008 *KIDS COUNT Data Book*

Annual report on child well-being ranks Arkansas 45<sup>th</sup> for third straight year  
*Persistent poverty, declining drop-out rates and juvenile justice reform spotlighted*

**LITTLE ROCK** – Arkansas children are better off than they were in 2000 in several key areas, but the state still ranks among the bottom of states for child well-being, according to an annual report to be released Thursday by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

The 19<sup>th</sup> annual *KIDS COUNT Data Book* indicators show:

- Six areas of improvement in Arkansas since 2000: infant mortality rate, child death rate, teen birth rate, percent of teens who are high school dropouts, percent of teens who aren't working or attending school and the percent of children living in poverty.
- Three areas worsened: low-birthweight babies, the percent of children living in families where no parent has full-time, year-round employment and the percent of children living in single-parent families.
- The teen death rate is unchanged since 2000.

Despite the gains in some areas, Arkansas is ranked among the bottom quarter of states for nine of 10 indicators in the *Data Book*. Only our high school drop-out rate ranking of 15<sup>th</sup> place breaks that trend, up from a ranking of 27<sup>th</sup> in the 2007 *Data Book*. According to the data, 6 percent of Arkansas teens were considered high school drop outs in 2006, compared to 8 percent in 2005.

One in four Arkansas children lives in a family with an income below the federal poverty line. That's \$21,200 a year for a family of four. The 2008 *Data Book* ranked Arkansas 44<sup>th</sup> in that category, the same ranking as last year's *Data Book*.

"We are not doing enough to lift our children out of poverty, especially compared to other states," said Rich Huddleston, executive director of Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families. "While efforts to improve access to education and health care are making a difference, too many Arkansas children still lack the resources and opportunities to live healthy and productive lives and realize their full potential."

### **Juvenile Justice Spotlight:**

The *KIDS COUNT Data Book's* essay, "A Road Map for Juvenile Justice Reform," discusses youth who are involved in the juvenile justice system and highlights new approaches for reform. The essay captures the same critical issues that face Arkansas in its efforts to reform the state's juvenile justice system, said Paul Kelly, a senior policy analyst at Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families.

"Juvenile justice has suffered glaring gaps in recent decades between best practice and common practice, and between what is known and what is most often done," Kelly said. "The result of this approach has been: increased crime, needless endangerment of young people and damage to their future prospects, and millions in wasted taxpayer dollars."

According to a new independent report, "Juvenile Justice Reform in Arkansas: Building a Better Future for Youth, their Families and the Community," nine out of 10 youths detained and committed into Division of Youth Services custody were for non-violent offenses in the first three quarters of the current fiscal year.

"The good news is, understanding about delinquency – both its causes and cures – is vastly expanding," Kelly said. "We're moving towards a more effective, efficient and just approach."

During the past two years the Division of Youth Services Task Force on Juvenile Justice Reform has identified the need for reforms in the state's system and is working to develop a plan for implementing needed changes. Kelly is a member of that task force.

Arkansas must continue efforts to reform the system, including funding a strategic planning process, expanding community-based programs and developing model sites to offer fiscal incentives for communities to reduce commitments.

**To schedule an interview with Paul Kelly, senior policy analyst, by phone or in person, contact Tara Manthey at 501-371-9678 ext. 111 or [tmanthey@aradvocates.org](mailto:tmanthey@aradvocates.org).**

**Embargoed copies of the *KIDS COUNT Data Book* and juvenile justice essay were sent to reporters last week by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. If you don't have a copy of the media kit, contact Tara Manthey for access to an embargoed web site or copies of the printed materials.**

**The Data Book also will be available online at 2 a.m. CDT Thursday. Visit [www.aradvocates.org](http://www.aradvocates.org) for a link.**

*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. On the web at [www.aradvocates.org](http://www.aradvocates.org).*

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