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2008 KIDS COUNT Data Book Shows Rate of Low-Birthweight Babies is the Highest in 40 Years Essay Focuses on the Urgent Need to Reform Juvenile Justice

BALTIMORE – National trends in child well-being taken together have improved slightly since 2000, according to a report released today by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The 2008 *Data Book* also presents a clear path to reducing the number of children and youth in America’s justice system. The 19th annual *KIDS COUNT Data Book* indicators show:

- Five areas of improvement: child death rate, teen death rate, teen birth rate, high school dropout rate, and teens not in school and not working;
- One area had no change: infant mortality rate; and
- Four areas have worsened: low-birthweight babies, children living in families where no parent has full time year round employment, children in poverty, and children in single parent families.

These national trends are not on par with the well-being improvements that were seen at the end of the 1990s, with little change since 2000. The report cites that more children are living in relative poverty in the United States than in any other economically advanced nation.

“KIDS COUNT contains some good and bad news,” says Laura Beavers, coordinator of the national KIDS COUNT project at the Annie E. Casey Foundation. “We continue to see that well-being indicators have largely gotten better for teens, and they’ve gotten worse for babies. The percent of babies born at low-birthweight continues to increase, with the 2005 rate the highest reported since 1968.” Looking across all well-being indicators, New Hampshire, Minnesota, and Massachusetts rank highest, and New Mexico, Louisiana, and Mississippi rank the lowest.

Casey’s *KIDS COUNT Data Book’s* essay, “A Road Map for Juvenile Justice Reform,” discusses developments in the nation’s juvenile justice systems, highlighting recent research and reforms that provide the basis for a fundamental, urgently needed transformation. In 2006, the estimated daily count of detained and committed youth in the custody of juvenile justice facilities was 92,854. In the same year, two out of three (66 percent) of all youth in custody were there due to a non-violent offense and the ratio of rates of youth of color to white youth in custody was 3 to 1. The essay makes the case for keeping youth out of the adult justice system, reducing incarceration, ensuring safe institutions, and eliminating racially disparate treatment.

“The state and federal government must take a much closer look at the problems that are entrenched in the juvenile justice system,” says Douglas W. Nelson, president and CEO of the Annie E. Casey Foundation in Baltimore. “These problems often include harsh or abusive conditions; pervasive disparities in the treatment of youth by race and ethnicity; and disproportionate sanctions for minor and predictable misbehavior. We know and there is evidence to prove that with effective interventions, system reforms, and more effective policies, the system can produce better outcomes for young people.”

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The *KIDS COUNT Data Book's* essay challenges local and state level jurisdictions to develop a starting point for change. More than two decades of research from scholars has expanded the understanding of causes of delinquency and the developmental pathways that lead young people into and out of delinquency. As a result, there are several lessons that states and the nation must consider in order to move forward, such as giving families a critical role in resolving delinquency and reforming practices that blur or ignore the well-established differences between youth and adults.

“Although the juvenile justice system is at a critical stage, these problems can be overcome to yield a far more efficient and fair juvenile justice system,” declares Bart Lubow, the Casey Foundation’s director of Programs for High-Risk Youth. “There is a disturbing and increasing propensity to prosecute minor cases in the juvenile justice system that provides no benefit to public safety, but instead puts kids in harm’s way. Casey’s Juvenile Detention Alternative Initiative has indisputably delivered evidence that reform is indeed possible.”

Reforms recommended by the Annie E. Casey Foundation include:

- implementing policies and interventions that are age-appropriate for the child;
- reducing reliance on secure confinement;
- increasing reliance on effective community-based services;
- ensuring safe, healthy, constructive conditions of confinement;
- strengthening and empowering families to help youth succeed;
- keeping children and youth out of the adult justice system; and
- reducing racial disparities.

The essay finds that progress can be made with a strong commitment to reform by diverse agencies and constituents. State and local leaders must find an entry point for their efforts. They should focus on a particular problem or issue, whose solution requires the adoption of policies and programs that can influence other components of the system. Jurisdictions must collect and analyze data in order to hold systems accountable. The federal government can help with reform by making crucial contributions to system funding; promoting aggressive efforts to reverse the disproportionate treatment of minority youth and reducing the alarming levels of abuse in correctional custody; and strengthening protections of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act.

“We are poised to turn a crucial corner in reforming juvenile justice,” says Nelson. “Over the years, juvenile justice systems have too often become a dumping ground for youth who should be served by other public systems. It is time that this nation realizes the court’s vision as a place where youth receive a measure of justice, worthy of its name.”

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is the largest private charitable organization in the world that focuses exclusively on improving the lives of vulnerable children and families. For more information, visit www.aecf.org.

The *KIDS COUNT Data Book* with state-by-state rankings, supplemental data, and the essay, “A Road Map for Juvenile Justice Reform,” is EMBARGOED until June 12, 3:00 a.m. EDT, but can be viewed online at www.kidscount.org/2008databook, beginning May 28. Please call 202-842-3600, extension 230 for the password.

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