

## Kids Count report

# Living conditions worsen for US children

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For decades, measures of child well-being in the United States—infant mortality rates, the percentage of children whose parents had steady employment, and general health indicators—saw gradual improvements or stable levels for the overall population. Since 2000, however, many aspects of this trend have stalled or reversed course as millions of working class families have fallen into poverty and low-wage jobs, and basic government-funded social programs have eroded.

Data compiled in the annual *Kids Count* report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF) emphasize this fact, noting that now “more children are living in relative poverty in the United States than in any other economically advanced nation.”

Most of the figures in the report are derived from the federal Census Bureau’s 2000-2006 American Community Surveys, Supplementary Surveys, and analysis by the Population Reference Bureau. The AECF also utilizes state-level data, which is more recent, but not consistent across the country. In the years since the bulk of the census data was compiled, the situation has undisputedly worsened for broad sections of the population. Nevertheless, the figures are revealing and worth looking into in some detail.

The AECF noted that between 2000 and 2006, the 10 indicators of child well-being—infant mortality and low-birth-weight rates, child and teen death rates, teen pregnancy and high school dropout rates, and proportions of children living in single-parent, low-income, and unemployed parent households—have overall remained flat; “improvements have stalled.”

“In fact,” the report states, “the child poverty rate has increased by 6 percent, meaning 1 million more children in poverty in 2006 than in 2000.” In 2006, 18 percent, or 13.3 million children, officially lived in poverty.

The 2006 poverty line was \$20,444 for a family of two adults and two children. This is an unrealistically low government determination that has the effect of restricting aid eligibility and understating the official poverty estimates. Most advocacy organizations suggest that a more realistic poverty threshold would fall closer to twice the federal poverty line. The definition of “low-income,” which is less than twice the poverty rate, is therefore a frequent measure used for economic surveys, and one that more accurately captures the living conditions for the broad majority of working families.

In 2005, more than 14.8 million children lived in low-income working families, with the highest geographic concentrations in urban areas and in the South, and demographically among black and Hispanic populations.

Indicators varied enormously among the states. According to the AECF, “The rates of the worst states are approximately two to four times those of the best states on every indicator.” New Hampshire,

Minnesota and Massachusetts ranked highest overall; Mississippi, Louisiana and New Mexico had the lowest composite index.

In 2006, 24.3 million US children—one in three—were living in families where no parent had full-time, year-round employment. In North Dakota, which fared best in the AECF ranking on this measure, 24 percent of children lived in this situation. In Louisiana, 43 percent of kids lived in households where adults did not have steady work; in Mississippi, the rate was 42 percent. Throughout the South and Southwest, virtually all state-level indicators of child well-being were at their worst.

Urban areas throughout the country registered far higher concentrations of poverty than the national average. In Detroit, Michigan, 59 percent of children had no parent at home who had a full-time, year-round job, and 16 percent of children lived in low-income households where no parents worked at all in 2006.

Although Detroit is well known as a city with deep and growing impoverishment, the AECF tabulations indicated that working class families in many other cities throughout the country were confronting economic crisis in similar numbers. In both Atlanta, Georgia, and Memphis, Tennessee, 53 percent of children lived in families in which no parent had full-time, year-round employment; 57 percent of children in New Orleans, Louisiana, and in Cleveland, Ohio, faced the same circumstances.

According to Census Bureau data, upon which the AECF tabulations are based, 64 percent of children in Hartford, Connecticut, lived with parents who did not have full-time employment through the year, but the city was not included in the rankings. Even in the better-ranked cities, Mesa, Arizona, and Virginia Beach, Virginia, one in four children lived in such circumstances.

In virtually every city for which data was provided, the majority of children lived in low-income households falling under the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development definition of “housing burdened,” wherein housing costs consumed more than 30 percent of monthly incomes. Above this level, according to HUD, families are less likely to have enough financial resources left for food, utilities, or other basic needs.

Exorbitant housing costs are a pervasive problem in the US. The District of Columbia registered the lowest proportion of low-income families in this predicament—57 percent. In Miami, Florida, 85 percent of children lived in this situation. The state-by-state data was comparable, with New Jersey ranking highest at 80 percent, and sparsely populated South Dakota ranking lowest at 38 percent. Nationwide, two in three low-income children were in housing-burdened families.

Such figures carry significant social implications. An increasing proportion of the younger generations in the US are growing up in

economic straits, in families burdened by low wages, rising living expenses, and debt. For younger workers who have children at home, particularly in former industrial strongholds and manufacturing centers, steady employment is more difficult to secure. The “American dream”—finishing school, landing a good-paying job, buying a home and raising a family—is far from the reality for many working class households.

As the financial situation worsens, health, education and other indices of overall well-being also decline.

Nationwide, the number of low-birth-weight births has increased dramatically. In 2005, more than 338,500 babies were born weighing less than 5.5 pounds—putting them at higher risk for death before the age of 1 and having developmental problems. Some 8.2 percent of all births in 2005 were low birth weight, up 8 percent since 2000. The rate is the highest in 40 years.

Similarly, the infant mortality rate—the measure of infant deaths per 1,000 live births over the year—has not improved since 2000. In 2001-2002, the infant mortality rate increased for the first time in five decades. According to the AECF, in 2005, 28,440 infants died in the US, averaging to 6.9 deaths per 1,000 live births. Mississippi’s infant death rate stood at 11.3 per 1,000 births. The District of Columbia, which was not included in the AECF rankings, had an infant mortality rate of 14.1, and the overall infant mortality rate for African-American babies was 13.7 in 2005. These rates are higher than those of Serbia, Sri Lanka, Uruguay, and Bosnia, and nearly 100 other countries.

The rates of low-birth-weight births and infant mortality must be seen in the context of decades’ worth of improvements to prenatal care and medical technology. Behind the worsening health outcomes for children and their mothers is the dismantling of social programs, which began under the Clinton administration and has accelerated under Bush, along with the initiatives of reactionary state governments to gut funding and privatize healthcare for the poor.

At the same time that government assistance has been scaled back and restricted, employers have cut pensions and insurance benefits for hundreds of thousands of workers, and the costs of private insurance and medical care itself have soared to prohibitive levels. In many cases, families that can barely afford housing and food simply go without medical care.

Child and teen death rates have declined for the past several years, which the AECF attributes in part to better medical technology. The report notes that during 2005, nearly 11,400 kids between the ages of 1 and 14 died in the US, averaging 31 per day. In addition, “13,703 adolescents ages 15 to 19 died, and this is the equivalent of the number of passengers on 39 jumbo jets. Virtually all of these deaths were preventable.”

Teen pregnancy rates have also declined over the past several years, to just under 414,600 babies born to teenage girls in 2005. This is still about 1,136 births every day, making the US rate one of the highest among economically developed nations in this category. The AECF notes that “preliminary data for 2006 show the possibility of an increase in the teen birth rate for the first time in a decade.”

The high school dropout rate has also declined, to 7 percent nationally. However, in 2006, the report notes that there were 1.1 million teens between the ages of 16 and 19 who were not in school and had not graduated, and there were 1.4 million in this age group who were neither in school nor working. Reflecting economic stagnation, for the 15 states comprising virtually the entire South and Southwest of the country, 1 in 10 teens were “idle.”

Corresponding to a deterioration in the quality of education,

economic opportunities and, in general, social and cultural outlets for youth, the “juvenile corrections systems” have grown larger and more draconian throughout the country. Beginning in the 1990s, many schools began adopting various so-called “zero-tolerance” policies and invasive security practices. Rather than simply working to correct behavior within the school systems, students who violated school policies were instead sent into the court systems. There, because of cuts to mental health and child welfare programs, large numbers of teens with behavioral problems or mental disabilities were shunted into juvenile detention centers.

“Each year now, as many as 200,000 youth under age 18 are tried in adult criminal courts nationwide,” according to an essay accompanying the *Kids Count* data book. And on any given day in the US, nearly 100,000 young people are confined by court order in prisons, “treatment” centers, or group homes. The AECF notes, “Just 24 percent of youth confined in 2003 were adjudicated for violent felonies, whereas more than 45 percent were guilty only of status offenses; probation violations; misdemeanors; or low-level felonies unrelated to violence, weapons, or drug trafficking.” In 29 states, kids are automatically transferred out of juvenile courts into the adult criminal courts for certain crimes on the reactionary notion of “adult time for adult crime.”

Teens within the adult corrections systems are subjected to horrific abuse. They are far more likely to be sexually assaulted, be beaten, and commit suicide. Their mental health and development are profoundly interrupted by incarceration. According to research from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation cited by the AECF, “Only 12 percent of formerly incarcerated youth had a high school diploma or GED by young adulthood.” And “Only about 30 percent were in either school or a job one year after their release...and they are more likely to be divorced and to bear children outside of marriage.”

Juveniles are also being subjected to long sentences, even for life terms. The AECF comments: “While the Supreme Court outlawed the death penalty for juveniles, it did not ban life sentences without the possibility of parole, a disturbingly popular alternative. Worldwide, 2,388 prisoners are currently serving life sentences for crimes they committed before age 18; all but 7 are imprisoned in the United States.”



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