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Contact: Teresa Falgoust tfalgoust@agendaforchildren.org 504-586-8509

Pandemic Deepened Threats to Child Well-Being in Louisiana

Families Struggle with Hunger, Mental Health Issues, and Education Inequities, according to Annie E. Casey Foundation report

NEW ORLEANS — Louisiana households with children are facing high levels of food insecurity and mental health challenges in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the **2021 KIDS COUNT® Data Book**, a 50-state report of recent household data developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation analyzing how families have fared between the Great Recession and the COVID-19 crisis.

This year's *Data Book* shows nearly a decade of progress could be erased by the COVID-19 pandemic unless policymakers act boldly to sustain the beginnings of a recovery from the coronavirus crisis.

The *Data Book* shows that more than one out of every five Louisiana adults with children in their household (21%) reported that they sometimes or often did not have enough food in the previous two weeks in March 2021, a higher rate than any other state. More than one in four Louisiana adults with children (28%) reported feeling down, depressed or hopeless in March 2021, compared with the national average of 22%. Louisiana school-age children were also much less likely than their peers in nearly every other state to have both internet access and a computer or digital device for educational purposes, limiting many students' abilities to participate fully in virtual learning. In March 2021, 22% of Louisiana households with children enrolled in public or private school lacked such access, compared with a national average of 12%.

"Even before the pandemic, Louisiana ranked 48th in overall child well-being, and all available data suggest that conditions have deteriorated since 2019 for many of our children and families," said Teresa Falgoust, director of data and research at Agenda for Children, Louisiana's member of the KIDS COUNT network. "As our state emerges from the pandemic, we need to make child well-being a top priority in all of our policies, from the state budget to housing policy."

The *Data Book* shows simply returning to a pre-pandemic level of support for children and families would shortchange millions of kids and fail to address persistent racial and ethnic disparities.

Sixteen indicators measuring four domains — economic well-being, education, health and family

and community context — are used by the Foundation in each year's *Data Book* to assess child well-being. The annual KIDS COUNT data and rankings represent the most recent information available but do not capture the impact of the past year:

- **ECONOMIC WELL-BEING:** In 2019, 289,000 (27%) of Louisiana children lived in households with an income below the poverty line, a level that remained unchanged from 2010.
- **EDUCATION:** In 2017–19, 62,000 (48%) of young children ages 3 and 4 were not in school, ranking the state ninth on this measure, reflecting long-standing state and federal investments in Head Start and pre-kindergarten. While Louisiana is performing better than many states on this measure, nearly half of our state's preschoolers still lack access to early childhood education experiences that can set the stage for success in school and in life. Data collected by the Louisiana Department of Education suggest access to early childhood education is likely even lower for children under the age of three.
- **AFFORDABLE HEALTH CARE:** In 2019, 4% of Louisiana children did not have health insurance, compared with 3% in 2018. This was the first increase in Louisiana's uninsured rate for children since the Census Bureau's American Community Survey began tracking this data in 2008.
- **FAMILY AND COMMUNITY CONTEXT:** In 2015-19, 208,000 (19%) of Louisiana children lived in high poverty areas, ranking the state 48th on this measure.

Survey data from the last year add to the story of Louisiana's children and families in this moment:

- During the pandemic, in 2020, 27% of adults in Louisiana with children in the household reported having little or no confidence in their ability to pay the next rent or mortgage payment. However, by March 2021, this figure had fallen to 23%, suggesting the beginnings of a recovery.

"The COVID-19 pandemic is the most extraordinary crisis to hit families in decades," said Lisa Hamilton, president and CEO of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. "Deliberate policy decisions can help them recover, and we're already seeing the beginnings of that. Policymakers should use this moment to repair the damage the pandemic has caused — and to address long-standing inequities it has exacerbated."

Investing in children, families and communities is a priority to ensure an equitable and expansive recovery. The Annie E. Casey Foundation's recommendations include:

- **Congress should make the expansion of the child tax credit permanent.** The child tax credit has long had bipartisan support, so lawmakers should find common cause and ensure the largest one-year drop ever in child poverty is not followed by a surge.
- **State and local governments should prioritize the recovery of hard-hit communities of color.**

- **States should expand income support that helps families care for their children.**
Permanently extending unemployment insurance eligibility to contract, gig and other workers and expanding state tax credits would benefit parents and children.
- **States should strengthen public schools and pathways to post-secondary education and training.**

Release Information

The *2021 KIDS COUNT® Data Book* will be available June 21 at 12:01 a.m. EDT at www.aecf.org. Additional information is available at www.aecf.org/databook. Journalists interested in creating maps, graphs and rankings in stories about the Data Book can use the KIDS COUNT Data Center at datacenter.kidscount.org.

About Agenda for Children

Agenda for Children, a private nonprofit organization, works to make Louisiana a state in which all children can thrive. Visit www.agendaforchildren.org to learn more.

About the Annie E. Casey Foundation

The Annie E. Casey Foundation creates a brighter future for the nation's children by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling communities into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow. For more information, visit www.aecf.org. KIDS COUNT® is a registered trademark of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

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