

News Release

For Immediate Release

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Contact: Erica Nelson, Kids Count and Race to Equity Project Director
enelson@kidsforward.net, (608) 284-0580 x-321

Ken Taylor, Kids Forward Executive Director
ktaylor@kidsforward.net, (608) 284-0580 x-302

Investment is Needed for Wisconsin's African American Children and Families to Thrive

MADISON, Wisconsin – The annual *KIDS COUNT® Data Book* is released today, revealing a concerning picture and showing investment is needed for Wisconsin's African American children and families to thrive. The Data Book provides a snapshot of well-being for African American youth and families in Wisconsin. As we reckon with COVID-19 disproportionately impacting African Americans, and a wave of powerful organized resistance to the systemic oppression that has harmed African Americans for generations, this data serves as a baseline for what children and families were experiencing as we entered these unprecedented times. Data is collected on health, economic, education, and family and community indicators. Even before the events of 2020, rankings for Wisconsin's children revealed a concerning picture, especially for our African American children. KIDS COUNT indicators show that not only were our state's African American children experiencing larger barriers than their white peers, but most indicators of well-being for African American children in Wisconsin were more severe compared to the national average for African American children. In other words, Wisconsin continues to lag behind other states in addressing racial inequities.

Child poverty rates rose sharply among African American children in Wisconsin, from 36% in 2017 to 42% in 2018. The opposite occurred for African American children nationwide – child poverty dropped from 33% to 32%. The following 2018 indicators for Wisconsin's African American children reflect a similar pattern:

- over half (51%) lived in families with parents lacking secure employment, compared to 41% of African American children nationwide;
- over half (51%) lived in families spending over thirty percent of their income on housing, compared to 44% of African American children nationwide;
- close to half (43%) lived in high poverty areas, compared to 26% of African American children nationwide.

These experiences are in stark contrast to indicators of well-being for white children. Economic indicators were commonly three to four times more severe for African American children and families in Wisconsin than for white children and families. Compared to white children:

- child poverty rates were close to five times higher for African American children in 2018;
- the percentage of children in families with parents lacking secure employment was three times higher for African American children, and this disparity was the same for children in families with high housing cost burdens;
- the percentage of African American babies born at low birthweights was two and a half times higher in 2018;
- the percentage of African American students not graduating on time was five times higher.

Perhaps most striking when comparing these indicators was the fact that in 2018, 43% of Wisconsin's African American children lived in high poverty areas, compared to only 1% of their white peers. In addition, African American children were also experiencing higher barriers than other children of color on the majority of indicators tracked by the *KIDS COUNT Data Book*.

However, some indicators show that progress was gained or maintained for Wisconsin's African American youth. Though still far higher than the state average, the rate of African American child and teen deaths and the percentage of African American students not graduating on time decreased from 2017 to 2018. Access to health insurance continued to be high among African American children, with only 2% lacking health insurance. This high rate of children's coverage has not prevented African Americans in Wisconsin from experiencing disproportionate harm from COVID-19, however, as Kids Forward recently outlined (<http://kidsforward.org/both-essential-and-expendable/>).

Meaningful changes on many of these indicators were rare for Wisconsin's children and families collectively, however. There was no change on the four state economic indicators from 2017 to 2018. There was also no change on the percentage of Wisconsin babies born at low birthweights. Wisconsin's ranking of the percentage of children without health insurance only changed from 18th to 17th this year, and we still have work to do to ensure that all children can access medical care. Though Wisconsin's rank on education indicators improved from 15th to 9th this year, this may be due to outcomes for other states dropping, rather than a signal of positive advances. For example, the percentage of Wisconsin fourth graders scoring below proficient in reading changed only 1% (from 65% in 2017 to 64% in 2019). The fact that Wisconsin's ranking on this indicator changed from 30th to 16th suggests the educational picture in other states is even more concerning. Similarly, for math, 61% of eighth graders scored below proficient in 2017, and 59% in 2019, as our state's rank changed from 10th to 4th. Consequently, we must double our support for our students in these unprecedented times, to create real educational advancements and ensure Wisconsin's children furthest from opportunity have the same chance to thrive.

Early learning sets the foundation for positive achievements across the lifespan. The need to support our child care workforce has never been clearer than during the COVID pandemic, as caregivers are expected to continue working both without child care providers, and without child care from older generations. As Kids Forward outlined in a recent report, access to high quality subsidized child care can differ for African American and White children in Wisconsin

(<http://kidsforward.org/achieving-equity-in-early-learning/>). Under-resourced schools have scrambled to recreate their classrooms online, and many children are left without access to the necessary technology at home that their opportunities for learning now depend on. Maintaining housing may be a substantial family stressor when there is dwindling income.

As Wisconsin faces the twin challenges of COVID-19 and economic recession, we must take action to move toward a future that prioritizes people of color, the marginalized, the most vulnerable, and the oppressed. Now is the time to fight for greater child care funding, and changes to school funding formulas that leave children in less wealthy areas with fewer resources for learning. Now is the time to fight for comprehensive health care and ensure that everyone has access to affordable, comprehensive health coverage. Now is the time to fight for Black Lives, to meaningfully transform structures and policies that allowed the barriers experienced by African American children and families in our state to continue uninterrupted for far too long. For the sake of our children and our future, Kids Forward calls on our policy makers and stakeholders to advocate for the following:

- Ensure equitable statewide access to COVID-19 testing, health care, and treatment.
- Reform unemployment insurance to cover all workers, and make sure they don't lose benefits if they don't agree to return to an unsafe work environment.
- Eliminate delays and regulations in all benefit programs that make it more difficult for families to receive urgently needed support.
- Reduce overincarceration and the severe racial inequities within the criminal justice system, which hollow-out entire communities, and re-invest those resources in family and community strengthening supports.
- Increase access to high-quality, affordable early education for all children.
- Raise Wisconsin's minimum wage and expand the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) to help combat poverty among children and families.
- Expand affordable housing initiatives.
- Fully expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act, to add an affordable coverage option helping thousands of people across the state and saving millions in state funds.
- Ensure that the 2020 Census counts all children, especially those under 5 years old and those from hard-to-count communities.
- Correct the systemic issues surrounding programs and policies that create and perpetuate disparate outcomes for Wisconsin's children of color.

The indicators outlined in the *2020 KIDS COUNT Data Book* help to show the many ways in which we as a state are failing our children, particularly our African American children. The paths to progress will be reflected in our state and local budgets. We must continue to invest in our youth, and believe in a future that is data-informed, thriving, equitable, and inclusive. Now is the time to ensure that state investments deliver what children need to reach their full potential, particularly African American children and families, and those furthest from opportunity.

Release Information

The *2020 KIDS COUNT® Data Book* will be available June 22 at 12:01 a.m. ET at <http://www.aecf.org>. Additional information is available at <http://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.

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About Kids Forward

Kids Forward advocates for effective, long-lasting solutions that break down barriers to success for children and families in Wisconsin. Using research and a community-informed approach, Kids Forward works to help every kid, every family, and every community thrive.

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.