



Rhode Island KIDS COUNT
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Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Releases Annual Factbook on the Status of Rhode Island's Children

Data on 63 indicators of child well-being show progress and setbacks for children and their families in the areas of health, education, safety and economic well-being.

Keynote speaker, Harriet Meyer of the Ounce of Prevention Fund in Chicago, highlights the positive impact of high-quality early-learning programs on educational achievement and the economic success of the next generation.

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Warwick, RI, April 6, 2009 – Rhode Island KIDS COUNT released its 15th annual report on the well-being of Rhode Island's children at a policy breakfast on **Monday, April 6, 2009 from 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m.** at the **Crowne Plaza Hotel at the Crossings**, Warwick, RI. The report was released to an audience of over 500 people, including members of the Rhode Island congressional delegation and community leaders and policymakers from education, health, business and human services. In releasing the latest available statistics on 63 different aspects of children's lives, from birth through adolescence, the *2009 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook* charts improvements and declines in the well-being of children and youth across the state and in each of Rhode Island's 39 cities and towns. The Factbook indicators are grouped into five interrelated categories: family and community, economic well-being, health, safety and education.

Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, opened the policy breakfast stating, "The *2009 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook* shows areas of progress and areas where we need to make improvements. The recent economic crisis in our state and in our nation places children and families at risk as they struggle to pay the high costs of housing, food, heat, gas, and child care."

Bryant continued, “We need to ensure that critical public policy investments in child care, early education, health care and adult education and training remain in place and are strengthened. There must be a safety net in place for families that lose their jobs and families that struggle to care for their children. Investments in children and families are more essential now than ever before.”

Keynote speaker

Harriet Meyer, the President of the Chicago-based Ounce of Prevention Fund, delivered the keynote address at the policy breakfast. The Ounce of Prevention Fund invests in the healthy development of at-risk infants, toddlers, preschoolers and their families. The organization is a nationally recognized leader in the early childhood field, using an innovative cycle of family-focused programs, research, training, policy analysis and advocacy to help young children succeed in school and throughout life.

Meyer noted that Rhode Island is recognized as a policy leader on issues related to school readiness, including attention to the health, developmental and early education needs of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. She stated, “The time for investing in early childhood investments is now. Improving school readiness and narrowing the achievement gap is essential to our nation’s long-term economic success. We know how to do this. All children, especially those most at risk, must have access to high-quality early learning opportunities beginning at birth. We as a nation are capable of setting a new direction for the next generation by increasing investments in early learning.”

Child Poverty Affects Every KIDS COUNT Indicator

“Children in poverty suffer worse outcomes on every indicator of child well-being unless there are policies and programs in place to ensure that poor and low-income children have access to high-quality health care, child care and education,” stated Bryant. Nationally and in Rhode Island, poverty disproportionately affects minority children and young children. In 2007 in Rhode Island, 42% of Hispanic children, 29% of Asian children, and 26% of Black children lived in poverty, compared with 12% of White children. More than one-third (38%) of the children living in poverty in Rhode Island were under age six and almost half (44%) of all poor children were living in extreme poverty (less than half the federal poverty level). According to the *2007 American Community Survey* conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, 17.5% (40,468) of Rhode Island’s 231,579 children with known poverty status lived below the federal poverty threshold (\$16,705 for a family of three and \$21,027 for a family of four). This is a significant decrease

from 2004 when 21.0% of Rhode Island children were living in families with incomes below the poverty threshold, but an increase from 2006 when 15.1% of Rhode Island children were living in poverty.

EDUCATION

High-quality educational opportunities are critical to the economic well-being of children and families. Higher levels of educational attainment lead to positive economic and social outcomes for individuals, families and communities.

Child care subsidies: High quality child care and early learning programs for infants, toddlers and preschoolers have long-lasting positive effects on how children learn, develop and grow. Child care subsidies broaden a family's employment and child care options, including improving access to higher quality care. Between 1996 and 2003, the number of children receiving child care subsidies in Rhode Island increased steadily from 6,077 to 14,333. Since 2003, the number of families receiving child care subsidies has steadily declined to a low of 7,700 in 2008. This is due to a decrease in eligibility for child care from 225% to 180% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) and due to the rising unemployment rate, which means fewer people are eligible for child care subsidies. Many of these children have inconsistent access to early learning opportunities because they lose their eligibility for a child care subsidy if their parents change their work hours or lose their jobs.

Head Start: The *2009 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook* shows that 2,484 children were participating in Head Start in October 2008, a decrease from 2,780 children in October 2004. In Rhode Island, only 40% of the estimated 6,200 eligible children are enrolled in Head Start. Rhode Island supplements federal funding with \$1.2 million in state funding to enable 156 additional children to participate in Head Start, down from 400 state-funded slots in 2007. Rhode Island also eliminated the Comprehensive Child Care Services Program that provided Head Start-like services to approximately 300 Head Start-eligible children.

Access to Pre-Kindergarten Programs: Another way Rhode Island can improve access to early educational opportunities is through the creation of a pre-kindergarten program that builds on the existing early care and education infrastructure. Rhode Island will launch a small pre-kindergarten demonstration project in September of 2009 using a mixed-delivery system structure that relies on public schools, Head Start and the private child care providers already offering high-quality early educational opportunities to Rhode Island children.

Fourth and Eighth-Grade Reading Skills: Reading proficiency is fundamental to the development of academic competencies and basic life skills. Students attending schools in the core city districts, low-income students, students receiving special education services and minority students are all less likely to score at or above proficiency in reading than their peers. In October 2008, 68% of Rhode Island fourth graders scored at or above the proficiency level on the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) reading test, up from 60% in 2005. In 2008, 52% of low-income fourth-grade students were proficient in reading, compared with 80% of higher-income students.

Low reading ability in eighth grade has long-term implications for students. Sixty-five percent of eighth graders scored at or above proficiency on the 2008 NECAP reading test, compared with 56% in 2005. Hispanic eighth graders had the lowest reading proficiency levels of any racial and ethnic group in the state at 40%, compared with 45% for Black students, 46% for Native American students, 72% for Asian students and 73% for White students.

Schools Making Insufficient Progress: Factbook data indicate that there are racial and ethnic disparities in access to high-quality schools. More than half of all Hispanic and Black children and about one-third of Asian and Native American children in Rhode Island attend schools making insufficient progress compared with 16% of White children.

Graduation rates: High school dropouts are at greater risk of being unemployed, living in poverty, receiving public assistance, being a teen parent, being incarcerated, and having poor health. Of the Rhode Island class of 2008, 74% of students graduated on-time in four years, 3% of students completed their GEDs within four years of entering high school, 7% were still in school in fall 2008 and 16% had dropped out of school. Hispanic students had a 62% graduation rate, Native American students had a 63% graduation rate, Black students had a 64% graduation rate, Asian students had a 74% graduation rate and White students had a 78% graduation rate. The graduation rate for English Language Learner students was 59%, for students receiving special education services the rate was 56%, and for low-income students it was 61%.

Bryant stated, "Every day Rhode Island loses 20 students enrolled in high school who will fail to graduate with a diploma. Strategies that support effective teaching, increase the rigor of our schools, have every child reading proficiently by fourth grade, improve literacy skills for all

students and ensure that all youth graduate from high school and go on to college are essential to our efforts to reduce poverty and increase family economic security.”

HEALTH

Bryant remarked, “Rhode Island can be proud of our long-term commitment to affordable, high-quality health care for children and their families. We continue to see positive health outcomes in most areas of children’s health. Rhode Island ranks third best in the nation for the highest percentage of women receiving prenatal care and second best in the nation for the lowest rate of teen deaths. Our teen birth rates have been declining over the past decade, although we are beginning to see an upward trend – consistent with what is happening nationally.”

Access to Health Insurance: In 2007 in Rhode Island, 93.1% of all children had health insurance. Two-thirds (66.4%) of children in Rhode Island have health insurance coverage through their parents’ employer. Research shows that insured children are more likely than uninsured children to receive preventive care or medical treatment for common conditions like ear infections, that, if left untreated, can have life-long consequences and lead to more serious health problems.

Much of Rhode Island’s success in covering children is the result of RItE Care, Rhode Island’s health insurance program for low-income children and families. RItE Care provides comprehensive, quality health care with a focus on primary and preventive care. “It is now more important than ever to maintain Rhode Island’s investment in RItE Care, with its proven track record of creating positive improvements in children’s health. It is critical that we continue to provide access to health insurance for Rhode Island’s children and families at this point when so many families may be losing employer-sponsored coverage,” said Bryant.

New Indicator: *Housing and Health*

The *2009 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook* includes one new indicator: *Housing and Health*. Housing quality affects children’s ability to grow, think, learn, and form critical early bonds. Older housing units are more likely to have unsafe conditions for children (including lead paint hazards, water leaks that can lead to mold growth, and safety hazards due to limited maintenance). Poor housing quality is associated with higher rates of childhood asthma, lead poisoning and residential injuries. Rhode Island has the highest percentage of low-income children living in older housing in the nation. Between 2005 and 2007, 87% of low-income

children in Rhode Island lived in housing built before 1980, compared with 74% of all Rhode Island children. Overall in the U.S., 63% of low-income children live in housing built before 1980.

ECONOMIC WELL-BEING

Rhode Island Works: The Rhode Island Works Program (RI Works) is the state's welfare program funded primarily through the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. In State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2008, cash assistance represented less than 1% of Rhode Island's total federal and state budget. Between SFY1996 and SFY2008, state general revenue spending for cash assistance decreased 69% from \$58.0 million to \$15.7 million. RI Works replaced the Family Independence Program, effective July 1, 2008. TANF programs are intended to help families successfully transition to work by providing cash assistance and work supports, including employment services, SNAP (food stamp) benefits, health insurance and subsidized child care. In addition, welfare programs in Rhode Island and across the country have historically served as a safety net for children whose parents are unable to work due to a temporary or permanent disability and for children in working families earning less than the poverty level.

Between 1996 and 2008, the Rhode Island cash assistance caseload decreased by 54% from 18,428 to 8,424. In just the past year, from 2007 to 2008, the caseload decreased by 16% or 1,569 cases. A large part of the recent decline is the result of new policies that eliminate children's entitlement to cash assistance when parents reach their time limit.

Children Receiving Food Stamps/SNAP Benefits: In 2008, the Food Stamp Program was renamed the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Between 2006 and 2008, the number of Rhode Island children receiving food stamps/SNAP benefits increased 17% from 39,546 to 46,205. Many individuals and families in Rhode Island who are eligible for SNAP benefits do not receive them. Hunger and lack of regular access to sufficient and nutritious food can impede the growth and healthy development of children and cause academic and behavior problems. SNAP helps low-income individuals and families obtain better nutrition through monthly benefits they can use to purchase food at retail stores and some farmers' markets. Between 2005 and 2007, 11% of Rhode Island households were food insecure, a number that is likely to increase due to the current economic crisis.

SAFETY

Juveniles at the Rhode Island Training School: A total of 1,084 youth were in the care and custody of the Rhode Island Training School during 2008. Of youth discharged from the Training School in 2008, 84% were there for less than six months. High-quality community-based alternatives to incarcerating youth are more successful in preventing recidivism and are significantly more cost-effective than incarceration. Expanding Rhode Island's capacity to provide effective community-based alternatives to incarceration at the Training School for youth who do not pose a danger to the community is essential.

Children in Out-of-Home Placement: Rhode Island children in out-of-home care frequently experience multiple placements, lose contact with family members and often have overlooked educational, physical and mental health needs. On December 31, 2008 in Rhode Island, there were 2,654 children in the care of DCYF in out-of-home placement, a decrease of 20% from 2006 when there were 3,311 children and youth in out-of-home placements. In Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2008, 16.9% of children who had been in out-of-home care for less than a year had experienced three or more placements, compared with the national standard of 13.3%. Almost two-thirds (65%) of children who had been in DCYF care more than 24 months experienced three or more placements.

Presentation of Factbook to Key Leaders

After highlighting the progress and challenges facing Rhode Island's children, Bryant presented the *2009 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook* to the state's congressional delegation, the leadership of the General Assembly and other community leaders. At the end of the breakfast, Bryant noted, "During these tough economic times it is more important than ever that we protect the health and development of our state's children. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is committed to sustaining the gains we have made and to working together to make additional progress so that all children have what they need to thrive."

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Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is a statewide children's policy organization that works to improve the health, economic well-being, safety, education and development of Rhode Island children.