



AGENDA FOR CHILDREN

A VOICE FOR LOUISIANA'S CHILDREN

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Louisiana Ranked 49th in Overall Child Well-Being

Louisiana's children continue to fare worse than their counterparts in almost every other state, according to a report released today by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, which works to improve outcomes for America's most vulnerable children and families. The *2008 KIDS COUNT Data Book* ranks Louisiana 49th among states in overall child well-being.

The findings show two significant improvements in well-being for Louisiana teens—both the teen birthrate and the percent of youth not attending school and not working declined by about twenty percent since 2000. Unfortunately, outcomes for children worsened on seven other measures and remained unchanged on another (the high school dropout rate). Louisiana was ranked at the bottom of the list on eight out of ten basic indicators of child well-being, including the infant mortality rate, the child poverty rate, and the child death rate.

This year's Casey report focuses on youth in the juvenile justice system and highlights promising practices in the field. Several efforts to improve juvenile justice services in Louisiana are profiled, including the state's 2003 landmark Juvenile Justice Reform Act (Act 1225), which dramatically reduced the state's over-reliance on juvenile incarceration. Between 2002 and 2006, the number of incarcerated youth declined from about 1,200 to 600. Act 1225 mandates that the state adopt the "Missouri Model," in which youth receive treatment in small regional facilities, where they can maintain regular contact with their families. In Missouri, this model has resulted in better outcomes for kids (including lower recidivism rates) at a lower cost to taxpayers.

While Louisiana's reform efforts have resulted in dramatic declines in the number of youth in custody, the Kids Count data show that Louisiana continues to incarcerate youth at a higher rate than the national average. In 2006, Louisiana's rate of detained and committed youth in custody was 149 per 100,000 youth ages 10-15, compared to the national rate of 125 per 100,000 youth. Two-thirds of youth in custody in Louisiana are non-violent offenders—children whose needs could be more effectively met through a continuum of community-based services, including mental health and special education services. Even as the state has made substantial progress in improving our juvenile justice system over the past 5 years, some key components of reform have yet to be realized, such as the opening of smaller regional treatment facilities. Calling upon the governor and Office of Youth Development to fully implement Act 1225, Dana Kaplan of the Juvenile Justice Project said, "Louisiana must continue to build a justice system

that builds on the strengths of young people, rather than sentencing them to a cycle of brutality and abuse.”

The Casey Foundation’s Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI), another promising practice highlighted in the Essay, is currently being implemented in 5 Louisiana parishes (Calcasieu, Caddo, East Baton Rouge, Jefferson, and Orleans). JDAI, which has been implemented in nearly 100 jurisdictions across the country, works to reduce reliance on secure detention while achieving greater public safety outcomes. JDAI is helping local agencies improve public safety and outcomes for youth through a structured approach that includes:

- collaboration among agencies
- continual analysis of data to identify the systems weaknesses and measure the impact of reforms
- implementation of objective admissions criteria
- development and enhancement of alternatives to incarceration (such as reporting centers and electronic monitoring)
- improvements in case processing
- reducing racial disparities
- improvement in the conditions of secure confinement

Ilona Picou, the JDAI Coordinator in Orleans Parish, reports that JDAI presents us with a critical opportunity to achieve better outcomes for children in Louisiana.

In few areas of policy are there wider gaps between best practices and actual practice than in juvenile justice. While research shows that kids who penetrate deeply into the system tend to have the worst outcomes, many states continue to incarcerate more and more children every year. Even though studies have demonstrated that programs such as Multi-Systemic Therapy (MST) and Functional Family Therapy (FFT) produce far better results (e.g. lower recidivism and improved school performance) than incarceration, no state has implemented these programs on a large scale. Louisiana has made amazing progress in reforming its abusive juvenile justice system, but much work remains to be done.

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Agenda for Children, Louisiana’s statewide child advocacy organization, works to make Louisiana a state in which all children can thrive. For more information, please visit the Agenda for Children website at www.agendaforchildren.org.