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The Annie E. Casey Foundation Calls on Child Welfare Systems, Policymakers to Focus on the Needs of African-American Youth in Foster Care

A Project of
The Annie E. Casey
Foundation

2007 KIDS COUNT Report Highlights Importance of Lifelong Family Connections for Youth, Shows African-American Children Continue to Fare Worst in Economic, Health, Educational Outcomes

BALTIMORE – Although national trends in overall child well-being have improved slightly since 2000, the differences across racial and ethnic groups are large, and the outcomes for black children are worse on every one of the 10 indicators studied in a new report released today by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The 2007 *KIDS COUNT Data Book* also looks at the 726,000 children in the United States who spend time in foster care each year and calls for a focus on the needs of African-American youth.

The 2007 KIDS COUNT essay, “Lifelong Family Connections: Supporting Permanence for Children in Foster Care,” looks at how the United States can move toward having all children who are in foster care become part of a lifelong family. Children and youth who spend extensive time in foster care and leave care without a strong family relationship are at great risk of experiencing early parenthood, involvement with the criminal justice system, poverty, and homelessness. The essay points out that African-American children are vastly overrepresented in the child welfare population and are therefore particularly at risk of growing up without a strong, permanent family connection.

“Tragically, the over-representation of children of color is evident at all points in the child welfare system,” said Douglas W. Nelson, president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. “African-American children currently remain in foster care for significantly longer periods of time than white children. And once in the foster care system, families of color receive fewer services, have less contact with child welfare workers, and experience lower reunification rates with their families than white children do.”

On a single day in 2005, 32 percent of the children in foster care were African American, though African-American kids make up only 15 percent of all the children in the United States. National studies have shown no statistically significant differences in overall maltreatment rates between black and white families. Research has shown in some jurisdictions that African-American families are more likely to be reported for alleged abuse than white families in similar situations. Black children who are victims of abuse are 36 percent more likely than white victims to be removed from their families and placed in care. Studies show that children of color stay longer in foster care - for children entering care in 2000, 23 percent of the African-American kids stayed for three or more years, compared to 13 percent of the white children.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation believes that systems can reduce disparities and strengthen family connections for African-American youth in foster care by committing to key policy and practice strategies, including: the analysis of child welfare data by race, an increased use of kinship care and subsidized guardianship as a placement option, high-quality cultural competency training for decision-making child welfare practitioners, and the establishment of partnerships with churches and nonprofit organizations in African-American neighborhoods.

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“When a child’s safety is compromised with their birth parents and they must be removed from their home, the first placement option for any child should be a relative or extended family member who knows and loves them and can provide a much needed sense of security and familiarity. Children in kinship family placements are also more likely to be able to stay with their brothers and sisters,” said Wanda Mial, Senior Associate at the Annie E. Casey Foundation. “It’s also important that we make more of an effort to place African-American kids in their own neighborhoods– where they maintain greater continuity with their family, school, and adults who care deeply about them.”

The *KIDS COUNT Data Book’s* essay also calls on federal elected officials and policymakers to focus attention on child welfare financing reform, better data collection, and increased accountability to support greater permanence for all children in foster care. Recommended policy changes include allowing federal funds to be used for permanent guardianship and permitting states the flexibility to spend Title IV-E funds on programs that stress prevention, family support, and aftercare services. At this time, there is no federal funding provision to support permanent legal guardianship, which allows a child the benefit of a lifelong family, without terminating the parental rights of the child’s mother or father.

“The nation needs to do more than simply talk about the importance of lifelong family connections for children in foster care,” concludes Nelson. “We have good information on what works so there is no reason why we cannot implement the bold policy and system changes that can make permanence a reality.”

KIDS COUNT, a project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, is a national and state-by-state effort to track the status of children in the United States. The 18th annual *KIDS COUNT Data Book* indicators show:

- Four areas of improvement: child death rate, teen birth rate, high school dropout rate, teens not in school and not working;
- Two areas of slight improvement: infant mortality rate, teen death rate; and
- Four areas have worsened: low-birthweight babies, children living in families where no parent has full-time year-round employment, children in poverty, and children in single-parent families.

On the whole, non-Hispanic white children continue to have better outcomes compared with other racial and ethnic groups. The 2007 *KIDS COUNT Data Book* reveals persistent disparities in outcomes for children of color, particularly African Americans. The study shows that 65 percent of African-American children live in single parent families and 51 percent are living in families where a parent is lacking secure, year round employment. While the teen birth rate dropped across all racial and ethnic groups, the rate of low-weight births by African Americans is approximately twice as high as other groups.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization, whose primary mission is to foster public policies, human-service reforms, and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today’s vulnerable children and families. For more information, visit www.aecf.org.

The *KIDS COUNT Data Book* with state-by-state rankings, supplemental data, and the essay, “Lifelong Family Connections: Supporting Permanence for Children in Foster Care,” is available online at www.kidscount.org/sld/databook.jsp.