



KIDS COUNT Challenge: Wyoming Kids Beyond the Status Quo

By

Marc Homer, KIDS COUNT Coordinator

Let's face the facts. Based on child well-being indicators, the current outlook for Wyoming's children is markedly status quo. The 59th legislature can seize the opportunity to implement policies that start to turn this situation around so that Wyoming will be known as a state where children and families can thrive in communities that are truly prosperous.

Kids Count, a project funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation uses 10 child well-being indicators to rank the fifty states. Overall, Wyoming is ranked 28th in the nation. Our state is ranked 49th for its high child death rate, 41st for its high teen death rate, and 39th for the high rate of low-birth rate babies.

Kids Count uses another set of indicators called *Right Start* to compare the conditions of the population under which children are born. Wyoming is ranked 45th in the nation for the high rate of mothers who smoked during pregnancy, 38th for teen births, 32nd for births to unmarried women, and 20th for the percentage of births to mothers with less than 12 years education.

Those who are skeptical that policy choices can turn Wyoming's situation around might want to take a look at the state ranked #1 for child wellbeing, New Hampshire. Across the key Kids Count indicators, the Granite State is ranked in the Top 5 for eight indicators, and in the Top 10 for the remaining two. Obviously, policymakers in the state whose motto is *Live free or die* have been making some different choices than those in the Equality State.

First ranked (overall) New Hampshire has the least amount of children living in 100% poverty, while 28th ranked Wyoming actually has the second least amount. While the 100% federal poverty level is an accurate measure that tracks change over time, it sorely underestimates the number of working poor people. Thirty four percent of Wyoming's children live below 200% poverty—that is \$38,314 combined annual income for a family of four. According to the Wyoming self-sufficiency standard, this family of four needs \$38,000 to barely make ends meet. New Hampshire is ranked #1 for having the lowest rate of children below 200% poverty (23%), Wyoming is ranked 13th.

Wyoming's reputation for hard-workers is confirmed as the data shows that Wyoming is ranked first in the nation for having the lowest rate (1%) of children living in families where no adults worked in 2005. The reality is that families with two working adults, or a single working mom or dad in the labor force need quality child care providers whom they can rely on to help educate and take care of their kids. Now is the time to initiate policy measures that help kids and families. In the long-term, these measures will develop the human capital that is necessary to strengthen Wyoming with each successive generation and create lasting prosperity.