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## Kids Count in Michigan Data Book 2015 Using Data To Inform Current Policy Priorities

The Kids Count in Michigan Data Book 2015 was released on February 19, 2015. Kids Count continues to provide an annual look at trends in program participation and other outcomes for children and families.

As good public policymaking can contribute positively to well-being, inadequate or misguided public policymaking also contributes negatively. This year's Data Book again, reveals evidence of both as we've seen improved and worsened child outcomes in different areas, helping to illuminate where policymakers must put their energies in 2015 and beyond. The role that economic security, health and personal safety play in a child's ability to learn and succeed cannot be ignored, nor can the undeniable link between the educational success of their parents and their own later success. The good news is that we know what it takes for children, youth and families to thrive at home, in school and in the workplace, and where better investments can and should be made. We need to invest in what works.

The annual Michigan budget is the single, most powerful expression of the state's policy priorities. It is during the budget process that decisions are made about how we spend our public revenues, and policymakers must consider competing interests when dividing up tax dollars. The Governor recently introduced his recommendations for the state budget. His budget proposal reflects what he has termed, the "River of Opportunity," where public policy focuses on the needs of people, rather than on individual programs.

As they budget process progresses through the Legislature over the next several months, what does the Kids Count data tell us about how to shape those investment priorities?

**SUPPORTING FAMILIES.** Do budget investments provide opportunities that simultaneously help children thrive while their parents get ahead in life?

What does the Data Book tell us? The Data Book again highlights the most serious challenge to children, youth and families in Michigan: the continued increase in child poverty, despite recent economic recovery. There are thoroughly researched and documented short- and long-term impacts of the lack of economic security on children, youth and families. While struggling families have been supported through nutrition and health programs, the Data Book highlights the failures to adequately support the neediest families with income and child care assistance and illustrates the difficulty in raising education levels of parents contributing to child poverty.

What do we expect the FY16 budget process to prioritize?

1. Reinstate supports for low-wage workers like the Earned Income Tax Credit.
2. Increase access to child care subsidies to better mirror the economic need of families, support parents' work and provide quality settings beyond preschool.
3. Increase support for adult education, particularly literacy skill-building and credential attainment.

**IMPROVE SCHOOL READINESS.** Do budget investments ensure that children are healthy and developmentally on track, and that they can access high-quality early experiences that prepare them for school and life?

What does the Data Book tell us? The Data Book indicators suggest that Michigan's focus on improving 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading has been successful, with large investments in preschool programs contributing to an improvement in later literacy skills. However, a lack of improvement in early health indicators has a negative impact. Supporting parents to be their children's first and best teachers will result in safe, stable, and nurturing home environments that promote children's early learning and development. Providing high quality early learning experiences can ensure that young children have the social and cognitive skills they need to start school prepared and will help prevent an achievement gap that emerges as young as nine months of age.

What do we expect the FY16 budget to prioritize?

1. Maintain the state's investment in quality preschool that's proven to increase school readiness.
2. Continue to expand investments in voluntary, evidence-based home visiting that provides parents with the tools they need to be their child's first and best teacher.
3. Invest state resources into *Early On* so children with developmental delays and disabilities can receive adequate early intervention services.

**ENSURE SAFETY AT HOME.** Do budget investments support parents to provide a safe and stable home essential for their children's education and development; and do they promote stability and opportunity for youth who have been in the foster care system to reach education and career success?

What does the Data Book tell us? As in the past several years, the Data Book again indicates disturbing trends in the share of children who have been identified and confirmed as victims of child abuse or neglect. Despite this trend, fewer children and youth are entering the foster care system. Increases in economic stressors for families impact their stability, and there are clear connections between child maltreatment and limited parenting skills, social isolation, domestic violence, untreated substance abuse and behavioral health problems.

What do we expect the FY16 budget process to prioritize?

1. Continue to expand investments in evidence-based home visiting.
2. Increase investment in child abuse and neglect prevention services, including consistent, accessible behavioral health services for parents, after more than a decade of disinvestment.
3. Prioritize access to secondary and post-secondary educational options for youth in the foster care system.

**IMPROVE COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS.** Do budget investments provide opportunities that are flexible and reach outside the school building so that all young people can obtain a high school credential and family-supporting employment?

What does the Data Book tell us? The significant improvement in fourth grade reading test scores did not continue through middle and high school, with the Data Book indicating minimal improvement on later scores, including nearly half of all Michigan high schoolers continuing to lack reading proficiency. Also indicated are minimal improvement in on-time graduation rates over the last several years continuing with a quarter of Michigan students not earning a diploma in four years. These education outcomes are significantly worse for African American, Hispanic and American Indian youth.

What do we expect the FY16 budget process to prioritize?

1. Increase investment in expanded learning to provide before-school, after-school, and summer learning opportunities that extend beyond the school building.
2. Increase investment in integrated services that better serves the most challenged children, youth, families, schools and communities.
3. Increase education funding support for the most challenged schools, communities and students.

## What Now? Use the Kids Count Data Book an Advocacy Tool

The Kids Count in Michigan 2015 Data Book can be purchased or downloaded from the Michigan League for Public Policy website at <http://www.mlpp.org/kids-count/michigan-2/mi-databook-2014>. The League has also made the annual data for all the trend indicators available through the national Kids Count Data Center website that hosts an interactive format that allows the creation of profiles, graphs, maps, and rankings: <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/>. This makes the data book an important resource for advocacy. Further information about these resources is available from Jane Zehnder-Merrell, Project Director, [janezm@mlpp.org](mailto:janezm@mlpp.org).

County data from the Kids Count 2015 Data Book provides a picture of the status of children and their families. Policy makers need access to that information in order to make informed decisions about programs and initiatives that impact your community, favorably or unfavorably. Term limits in Michigan result in many members of the Legislature with limited experience dealing with huge challenges to invest in critical policy and program in the face of economic challenges in Michigan. **They need your help now more than ever to understand how these challenges have impacted real people and families.**

**Use Kids Count as a conversation starter.** Even if you haven't talked with your elected officials before, your county Kids Count data can provide a topic of conversation. Ask your policy makers what they think about the data, and what plans they have to help address some of the issues of concern. Help your policy makers understand the context behind some of the numbers. If you've seen improvements in an area, have there been community efforts that have impacted the situation? Or have there been cuts in programs and services that have resulted in worsening data in an area?

**Your conversation with policy makers is critical!** Kids Count project staff provide copies of the Data Book to each legislative office, and utilize the information in conversation with policy makers throughout the year. However, when surveyed, legislators say that the way they find out about children and families in their area is from their constituents. Most were familiar with the Kids Count data, but the legislators who really utilized the information were those who had discussed it with their constituents!

For more information about talking with your elected officials, **contact Michele Corey at [michele@michiganschildren.org](mailto:michele@michiganschildren.org) or via phone at 517/977-0322.** More information about Michigan's Children's priority issues and connections to our Action Networks and blog posts are available at [www.michiganschildren.org](http://www.michiganschildren.org)