

## Improving outcomes for Wyoming children

by

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This year marks the 20th edition of the KIDS COUNT Data Book, a compendium of critically important data about the well-being of our nation's children and families. The data book is now backed by an extensive online data system that includes community level data.

This year's data book highlights the need for data-driven decision-making, a powerful yet sorely underutilized tool that can be used to improve results for Wyoming children.

Data informed policies can lead to more focused programming, a more efficient use of taxpayer dollars, and enhanced capacity to build communities that help produce positive outcomes for children and families.

This is a timely idea as communities across Wyoming begin addressing the critical need to reform the way we treat vulnerable children and families who often get caught up in the juvenile justice system. Experts across the state including the State's Juvenile Justice Advisory Council, law enforcement, attorneys, youth advocates, university professors, the Governor's juvenile justice policy analyst, and other experts in the field have all voiced the need for a statewide comprehensive data system for tracking youth who come into contact with the law. Such a data system will provide the feedback necessary for determining whether efforts are producing the desired results of reducing crime, making our communities safer, and helping at-risk youth reform their lives and become productive citizens.

A statewide juvenile justice data collection system will help clear the fog of myth and misinformation that persists in guiding the way juveniles are treated in Wyoming. What CEO in the business world today could successfully run a company without monitoring results? We should demand the same from government agencies that are entrusted with the safety of communities and the well-being of our children.

Wyoming's ranking in this year's Kids Count is based on data from 2006-07, just prior to the current economic recession that we are currently riding out. I'm concerned that at the height of an era of prosperity in Wyoming, our state ranked 32nd in the nation on ten key child well-being indicators. Despite having a low rate of unemployment and a low percentage of child poverty relative to the rest of the nation (ranked 7th for 12% of children 0-18 living in poverty), Wyoming backslid on six of ten indicators from 2000 to 2006.

It is disconcerting that Wyoming counties with low child poverty (Sublette-6%, Campbell-7%, Sweetwater-9%), showed poor results across child well-being indicators, racing to the bottom to rival counties with high child poverty (Goshen-20%), Fremont-20%), and those with sub-areas of high poverty such as Laramie and Natrona.

Compounding alarming figures that, prior to the recession, eighteen percent of American children were living below the official poverty line, is that the federal poverty measure (income below \$21,027 for a family of two adults and two children in 2007) is thoroughly outdated and does not accurately estimate the number of children living in impoverished households.

Developed in the 1960s, the official U.S. poverty measure is calculated by summing the cost of a rudimentary grocery budget and multiplying the total by three--food represented roughly one-third of a typical 1960s family budget. The poverty threshold has never been recalculated since that time, only adjusted for inflation, even though food now consumes about one-seventh of a typical family's budget. The outdated formula takes no account of child care, transportation, health insurance, and other expenses that consume a far greater share of families' income today.

It's easy to see the disconnect between the outdated poverty measure and reality when you consider that 51% of Wyoming children and 66% of U.S. children lived in low-income households paying 30 percent or more of income to housing costs (2006).

Wyoming communities, state officials, business leaders, and representatives at the state and national level need to make a greater commitment toward improving outcomes for Wyoming children.

For access to the Kids Count Data Center visit: [www.wyourkidscount.wykids.org](http://www.wyourkidscount.wykids.org)