

'Kids Count' Data Questioned

NH Falls from Top Ranking in New UNH Report

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DURHAM, N.H. -- University of New Hampshire researchers suggest there are major flaws in the conventional approach to ranking states by their quality of child well-being, an approach taken by the Kids Count Data Book. In a report released this week, Susan Engel, M.S., Carolyn Field, M.A., and David Finkelhor, Ph.D., of the UNH Family Research Lab, propose a system that substantially shuffles previous rankings.

For example, when New Hampshire is compared to other states using a new method, which takes into account race and improvement over time, it falls from its long-standing top spot in the 1999 national ranking to ninth. Utah and Alaska move up to first and second place, respectively.

The Kids Count Data Book, compiled by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, is a yearly publication that assesses child well-being in the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

The approach used by the UNH researchers took into account states' efforts at improving child well-being over time. The original Kids Count national composite ranking used only 1996 data, indicating the level of child well-being during only that year. The method used by Engel, Field and Finkelhor measured states' efforts at addressing child well-being over an 11-year period. This method allowed estimates of each state's improvement in child well-being outcomes over a period of time. For example, in the original Kids Count assessment, New Hampshire was ranked first, with the lowest rate of children in poverty. But, when ranked on the amount of improvement over the 11 years, New Hampshire dropped to next-to-last.

Furthermore, in the Kids Count analysis, New Hampshire ranked 12th for the percentage of children living with parents who do not have secure employment. After re-ranking according to amount of improvement, New Hampshire fell to last place on this measure.

The UNH researchers also criticized the Kids Count methodology for not taking into account the effects of

demographics. The new study recognized that child well-being in some states is burdened by its history and its racial composition. For example, Georgia and South Carolina, states with large minority populations, almost always finished near the bottom on child well-being in the Kids Count approach, along with many other southern states. However, after taking into account the size of the African-American population, the UNH researchers found that Georgia and South Carolina ranked in the top one-fourth of states in child well-being.

The new report says change over time is important in any analysis. If conclusions are drawn from data collected only for one year, Finkelhor says, this is not a good indication of policy efforts to improve well-being. He adds that analysts must recognize the effects of demographic factors, and states should be judged relative to demographic mix of their populations.

A copy of the full report is available as link from the UNH Family Research Laboratory homepage at <http://www.unh.edu/fri/>.

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