

This report, developed by Voices for Virginia's Children/ KIDS COUNT, provides an update on progress and unfinished business in promoting the well-being of Virginia's children. It addresses the question:

### HOW ARE VIRGINIA'S CHILDREN?

To answer this question, five domains of child well-being are profiled: poverty/economic security, early childhood, health, education and child welfare/safety. Each domain contains reliable data on a set of indicators, many of which can be compared to national data. This permits us to monitor trends in child well-being over time and also to compare Virginia children to their counterparts nationally. We compare current data to the same data from 2006 or in some cases even earlier. The latest data available on many indicators is from 2011, which gives us at least a five-year span in which to evaluate progress or decline.

Many of the indicators appear in the national KIDS COUNT DATA BOOK released annually by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, sponsor of the nationwide KIDS COUNT initiative. Voices for Virginia's Children is a Casey grantee and home to the Virginia KIDS COUNT Data Center. This report includes additional data that Voices tracks independently and that are not presented in the national book, providing an even more comprehensive picture of child well-being in Virginia.

### VIRGINIA'S NATIONAL RANKING ON OVERALL CHILD WELL-BEING

Each year the national KIDS COUNT DATA BOOK ranks states on overall child well-being based on their performance on the indicators tracked by Casey. During the past decade Virginia's overall rank has hovered in the low- to mid-teens, indicating that compared to children elsewhere, Virginia children consistently are doing fairly well. Because of Virginia's relatively strong economy and high median family income, the domain of poverty/family economic security usually compares very favorably with other states. Given that during this span the state's economy has generally rated in the top 7 or 8 nationally, the argument could be made that our overall child well-being rank should be even higher because, unlike many other states, Virginia has the capacity to invest more and thereby advance child well-being even more effectively.

### POVERTY/ECONOMIC SECURITY

Growing up in poverty puts children at-risk of a host of negative outcomes. Children from poor and low-income families are much more likely to live in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, have significant health problems, start school already behind, attend low-performing schools, experience learning problems and grade retention, be exposed to violence and other trauma, suffer abuse or neglect, develop behavior problems and become delinquent. As adults, they are more likely to have dropped out of school, have chronic health problems, experience periods of unemployment, make lower wages, be single parents, or have criminal justice involvement. The harmful effects of child poverty are cumulative: the longer the stay in poverty, the greater the risk of negative outcomes.

#### There are Two Overriding Conclusions about Child Poverty/Family Economic Security in Virginia

- Virginia's relatively strong economy and low unemployment keep the child poverty rate lower than the national average (currently 15.6 percent vs. 22.5 percent nationally) and lower than in most other states.
- Nevertheless, the situation in Virginia has worsened significantly in the last five years. The recession and subsequent slow recovery have driven many more Virginia children into poverty – 65,000 more today than in 2006, a 27 percent increase. The recession officially ended in June 2009, yet child poverty rates have continued to climb, prolonging the duration of poverty for thousands of children. Thus more children than ever before (285,000) are growing up poor and at-risk of the many negative outcomes associated with prolonged poverty.

One other disturbing trend mirrors a persistent national trend: the steady increase in the percentage of children being raised in single-parent families. Fully 30 percent of Virginia children (vs. 27 percent a decade ago) are now in single-parent families. These children are nearly four times more likely to grow up poor than those in two-parent families.

## HEALTH

Good health is critical for optimal child physical, intellectual, and social-emotional development, and poor health can interfere with development and prevent children from reaching full potential. Access to appropriate health care and sound nutrition is essential for reducing the incidence and prevalence of health problems that may compromise child development. Since 2006, Virginia has increased efforts to improve birth outcomes (i.e. to reduce the number of low birth weight deliveries) by awarding targeted additional funding to localities with the highest rates of low birth weight; and promoted health insurance coverage for all children by expanding outreach efforts to increase enrollment in FAMIS and FAMIS Plus.

The health domain shows mixed results:

- Nationally and in Virginia, the teen pregnancy rate and number of births to teens continued to decline through 2011 (latest data available).
- Efforts to ensure that children have health insurance and therefore access to sound health care have shown good success. Both the number and percentage of uninsured children have declined substantially since 2006. However, approximately 110,000 Virginia children remain uninsured.
- Youth tobacco use in Virginia has declined dramatically in the past decade.
- Virginia has been troubled for some years with a disturbingly high rate of low birth weight infants. The rate consistently exceeded the national average until 2011. The increasing trend of low birth weight as a percentage of total live births both in Virginia and nationally is alarming. Almost one in every 13 babies in Virginia and one in every 12 babies nationally is born with low birth weight.
- Childhood obesity nationwide has tripled in the past 20 years, and Virginia children have not escaped that alarming trend. The Virginia Foundation for Healthy Youth conducted a one-time survey of children's health in 2010. Twenty-two per cent of children 10-17 years old self-identified as overweight or obese. Clearly more Virginia children than ever before are at-risk of the negative health consequences of growing up obese or overweight. (The insert chart does not include a childhood obesity indicator because there are no data from an earlier year to compare to the data from this one-time study).

## EARLY CHILDHOOD/SCHOOL READINESS

The early childhood/school readiness sector has seen several positive developments in recent years. Virginia has taken steps since 2006 to expand access to publicly-funded preschool for low-income four year olds – a group likely to enter kindergarten already trailing their more advantaged peers. Through the public-private Virginia Early Childhood Foundation, the state has supported the development of local/regional coalitions that in turn have created or strengthened a variety of locally-driven school readiness initiatives. Other system improvements include the launch of the Virginia Star Quality Initiative, which improves program quality in childcare and early education programs but is not yet large enough to serve the majority of programs statewide; and the Early Education Alignment Initiative, which improved alignment between curricula in early education programs and the K-3 curriculum in public schools. However, due to recent state budget cuts, early childhood home visiting services for the most vulnerable families are less available than previously.



There are few systematic indicators available to judge the impact of these efforts statewide, which highlights the need for Virginia to institute improved school readiness measurement approaches. Nevertheless, data on the available indicators below are encouraging and suggest that efforts to strengthen early care and education programs have improved overall school readiness and early school success.

- The Virginia Preschool Initiative has substantially increased the number of disadvantaged four year-olds served.
- The percentage of children who score in the "not ready" range on the PALS-K measure has declined significantly during the last decade.
- The K-3 retention rate, a measure of early school success, has improved.

## EDUCATION

Education indicators consistently exceed national averages and often place Virginia in the top dozen or so states. The state benefits from relatively low rates of a variety of educational risk factors including child poverty, percentage of parents who are not high school graduates, and percentage of children in single-parent families.

The education domain in general has improved somewhat over time, though scores on national standardized achievement tests have shown little improvement in recent years.

- The number of children whose household head is not a high school graduate has decreased since 2005.
- The on-time graduation rate and the dropout rate have improved considerably over the past decade.
- Little progress has been made on reducing the percentage of students in 4th grade and 8th grade who score “below proficient” on national reading tests (National Assessment of Educational Progress – NAEP).

## CHILD WELFARE AND SAFETY

Virginia’s Child Welfare system until recently ranked near the bottom on various performance measures including its ability to find permanent homes for children in foster care. Recent improvements may be due at least in part to a reform initiative pursued since 2006, the intent of which is to promote more frequent use of best practices in child welfare decision-making and service delivery. The improvements certainly merit independent study to confirm that they can be attributed to the adoption of best practices.

Juvenile crime including violent crime has declined substantially in Virginia in recent years, mirroring a very strong national trend. And contrary to popular opinion, adolescent drug use has not increased in recent years and current rates are far below their peak, again both in Virginia and the U.S. as a whole.

Results paint a generally positive picture for this domain.

- The number and percentage of children in foster care has declined substantially since the initiation of reform efforts in 2007.
- Arrest rates for juvenile crime including violent crime have declined.
- The number of juvenile drug arrests has shown almost no change in the past 5 years.

**Previous gains in child well-being could be stalled or even reversed somewhat by one alarming trend - the economic downturn and slow recovery have driven many more Virginia children into poverty.**

## CONCLUSIONS

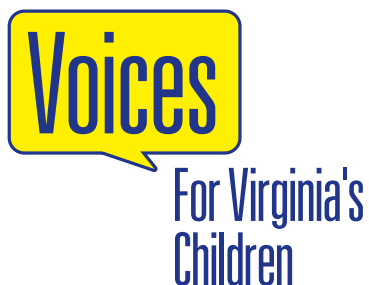
Overall, the well-being of Virginia’s children has improved somewhat during the past decade or so and consistently compares favorably to that of children living elsewhere. This overall positive picture contains one particularly alarming trend, however, that threatens to stall or even reverse some of this progress: the recession has driven more of Virginia’s children into poverty and economic insecurity. Research indicates that, on average, families need an income of at least twice the poverty level to cover basic needs and provide for the health and well-being of their children. Too many families are struggling to make ends meet – 33 percent of Virginia’s children – 615,000 of them – now live in families below 200 percent of federal poverty level. More Virginia children than ever before are now exposed to a greater number and intensity of stressful conditions, for a prolonged period of their childhood, putting them at greater risk of negative outcomes and a future of diminished prospects. It is critically important therefore for Virginia policymakers to preserve and, where possible, even strengthen the safety-net programs that support needy children and families during tough times.

The steady increase in the percentage of children raised in single-parent families is another disturbing trend. Children in single-parent households are much more likely to experience the hardships of poverty than children growing up in two-parent households.

Child well-being has improved in most domains during the last decade, though a number of particular indicators show little or no progress. Improvements are evident in the domains of early childhood/school readiness, child health, child welfare/safety, and education.

- Health domain improvements are especially noted in measures of adolescent health including lower rates of teen pregnancy and births to teens. Policy studies attribute these gains both to better access to effective contraception and to higher rates of teen sexual abstinence. Also noteworthy is the significant reduction in youth tobacco use, interpreted by policy experts as a result of both anti-smoking campaigns targeted to youth via the media and social marketing approaches; and to higher prices for cigarettes resulting from federal tobacco tax increases.
- However, the rate of low birth weight babies has increased slightly over the last decade despite some targeted efforts to improve birth outcomes. In every recent year except 2011, Virginia’s rate of low birth weight deliveries was worse than the national average.

- Early childhood measures show increases in the number of low-income children enrolled in preschool and reductions in both the percent of children whose PALS-K scores were below Kindergarten readiness levels and the percent of students retained in grades K to 3rd grade.
- Educational improvements include higher graduation rates and lower dropout rates. These may in part be due to improvements in educational risk factors; e.g. fewer children are growing up in households with a parent who failed to graduate from high school. However, the percent of children who read proficiently at the 4th and 8th grade levels remains low with little improvement during the last decade. This reflects a more general trend: academic achievement of Virginia students, as measured by scores on the various subject areas and grade levels in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), remains above the national average but seems to have reached a plateau in recent years.
- Child Welfare and Safety improved over the last few years, which mirrors a strong national trend. Fewer children are committing violent crimes and fewer children are arrested. A substantial decline has occurred in the number and percentage of children in foster care since the initiation of reform efforts. And adolescent drug use, as reflected in rates of drug arrests, is at historically low levels and not worsening.
- It seems particularly noteworthy that there are such positive gains in many indicators that reflect the well-being of adolescents: rates of graduation, dropout, tobacco use, teen pregnancy, teen births, teen violent crime and overall crime have all improved.



## HOW ARE VIRGINIA'S CHILDREN?

They are somewhat better than a decade ago, an encouraging finding, but one which is tempered by the possible long-term negative consequences – for children and for Virginia – of the prolonged increase in child poverty. Virginia's relative economic strength confers numerous benefits on families and children such that overall well-being compares favorably to other states and the nation as a whole. Conversely, with an economy that ranks among the best in the nation year after year, it is reasonable to ask if Virginia could do even more to promote child well-being. Given Virginia's fortunate capacity to make even greater public investments in the future well-being of its youngest citizens, policymakers should strive to do so, and citizens should insist that children become a higher priority. This will ensure an even brighter future for all Virginians.

## VOICES FOR VIRGINIA'S CHILDREN HAS ADDITIONAL DATA AND RESOURCES FOR THE CHILD WELL-BEING DOMAINS ADDRESSED IN THIS REPORT.

For locality-level data, visit the Virginia Kids Count Data Center at <http://bit.ly/vakidscountdata>.

For assistance with data questions, contact **Ted Groves**, *Kids Count Director*.

Information on public policy issues for specific domains is available by contacting:

**Margaret Nimmo Crowe** - *Child Health and Mental Health*

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We champion public policies to improve the lives of Virginia's children.

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# STATUS REPORT: CHILD WELL-BEING IN VIRGINIA - JANUARY 2013



GETTING  
BETTER



GETTING  
WORSE



**VIRGINIA NATIONAL RANK**  
(The composite indicators changed  
in 2012 to a child well-being index)



		VIRGINIA	PERCENT CHANGE	U.S.	PERCENT CHANGE
POPULATION OF CHILDREN	2011	1,853,546	6%	73,934,272	2%
	2000	1,743,410		72,376,189	



		VIRGINIA	PERCENT CHANGE	U.S.	PERCENT CHANGE
Child Poverty Rate	2011	15.6%	27%	22.5%	23%
	2006	12.3%		18.3%	
Children Living in Low-Income Families (Below 200% of Poverty Level)	2011	615,000	13%	32,730,000	13%
	2006	542,000		28,847,000	
Number of Children Living in Poverty	2011	284,561	30%	16,386,500	23%
	2006	219,261		13,285,569	
Number of Children in Single-Parent Families	2011	559,000	19%	24,718,000	19%
	2001	471,000		20,715,000	
Percent of Children in Single-Parent Families	2011	30%	12%	33%	17%
	2001	27%		29%	
Children Living in Families where no Parent has Full-time, Year-round Employment	2011	472,000	12%	23,777,000	18%
	2008	423,000		20,181,000	
Households with Children Receiving SNAP (Formerly Food Stamps)	2011	574,133	53%	8,254,190	61%
	2006	376,410		5,134,516	



		VIRGINIA	PERCENT CHANGE	U.S.	PERCENT CHANGE
Teen Pregnancy Rate Per 1,000 Females Ages 15 - 17	2011	16.3	-49%	N/A	
	2001	32		45	
Teen Live Births (Under 18)	2011	1,765	-42%	N/A	
	2001	3,063		N/A	
Number of Low Birth Weight Babies (less than 5 lbs. 8 oz.)	2011	8,204	5%	N/A	
	2001	7,816		308,747	
Low Birth Weight Babies as Percent of Total Live Births	2011	8%	1%	8.1%	5%
	2001	7.9%		7.7%	
Children Under 19 without Health Insurance	2011	108,043	-46%	5,527,657	-36%
	2006	200,737		8,634,000	
Percent of Children Under 19 without Health Insurance	2011	5.9%	-43%	7.5%	-32%
	2006	10.4%		11%	
Percent of Teens Using Tobacco Products	2011	31%	-45%	N/A	
	2001	56%		N/A	



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## EARLY CHILDHOOD

		VIRGINIA	PERCENT CHANGE		U.S.
Four Year-Olds served by Virginia Preschool Initiative	2012	16,618	179%	↑	N/A
	2002	5,966			N/A
Percent of Kindergarteners whose PALS-K Scores were Below Kindergarten Readiness Levels	2012	12.4%	-39%	↓	N/A
	2003	20.4%			N/A
K-3 Retention Rate	2011	1.8%	-63%	↓	N/A
	2001	5%			N/A



## EDUCATION

		VIRGINIA	PERCENT CHANGE		U.S.	PERCENT CHANGE
Children Whose Household Head is not a High School Graduate	2011	187,000	-18%	↓	11,131,000	-8%
	2005	228,000			12,035,000	
4th Grade Reading: Percent of Students Scoring Below Proficient (NAEP)	2011	61%	-3%	↓	68%	-3%
	2002	63%			70%	
8th Grade Reading: Percent of Students Scoring Below Proficient (NAEP)	2011	64%	2%	↑	68%	-1%
	2002	63%			69%	
Number of Students Not Graduating High School on Time	2012	10,449	-8%	↓	N/A	
	2008	11,314			N/A	
On-time Graduation Rate	2012	88%	7%	↑	N/A	
	2008	82.1%			N/A	
Percent of Teens Ages 16 to 19 Not in School and Not High School Graduates	2011	4%	-43%	↓	5%	-50%
	2001	7%			10%	



## CHILD WELFARE AND SAFETY

		VIRGINIA	PERCENT CHANGE		U.S.
Foster Care (Rate per 1,000 of Children Under 18)	2011	2.9	-26%	↓	N/A
	2006	3.9			7
Number of Children in Foster Care	2011	5,367	-33%	↓	N/A
	2006	7,979			502,497
Number of Violent Offenders (0-17)	2011	7,198	-37%	↓	N/A
	2006	11,474			N/A
Number of Juvenile Arrests	2011	31,635	-18%	↓	N/A
	2006	38,599			N/A
Number of Juvenile Drug Arrests	2011	2,732	-1%	↓	N/A
	2006	2,767			N/A

**Voices**

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