

POLICY NOTES

Child Well-Being and Economic Development in Georgia

by Janet Bittner and Clif DuBois

Making a significant public investment in the state's youth is a critical policy challenge confronting state and local decision makers.

For many years, social scientists have stressed the importance of social or human capital to economic growth and development. Although often overlooked, the well-being of children is an essential component of a state or community's human capital. Three reports published in the last two years document the state of child well-being in Georgia and suggest that making a significant public investment in the state's youth is a critical policy challenge confronting state and local decision makers.

For more than a decade, the Kids Count initiative has tracked the well-being of children at the state and local levels of government, using carefully selected statistical indicators. The primary objective of this research effort has been to ensure that policymakers, government officials, service providers, and citizens have high-quality data as they make policy and program decisions affecting the lives of children and families. Published by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the *Kids Count Data Book* assists states in tracking their performance on each of 10 indicators of well-being and provides a single composite measure for comparison with other states.

On three national indicators—high school dropout rates, percentage of children in poverty, and percentage of families headed by a single parent—the situation in Georgia actually worsened between 1990 and 1998.

Georgia has consistently ranked low on the individual and composite measures, never having ranked higher than 42d on the composite measure. In the most recent *Kids Count Data Book* (2001), Georgia showed a gain on 6 of the 10 indicators (see table) but in terms of overall improvement has not kept pace with the rest of the nation, falling to 44th among the 50 states. On some measures, Georgia compared favorably with other states: between 1990 and 1998, infant mortality rates dropped 31 percent in Georgia, compared with 22 percent nationally; teen birthrates fell 20 percent, compared with 19 nationally; and the child death rate fell by 19 percent, compared with 23 percent nationally. However, on three of the indicators—high school dropout rates, percentage of children in poverty, and percentage of families headed by a single parent—the situation in Georgia actually worsened.

A second report, *Georgia Kids Count Fact Book*, is a state-level report published annually by Georgians for Children and provides the same statistical information at the county level as the

Georgia Ranking and Trends on Kids Count Indicators

Indicators	Trend Data		National Rank 1998
	1990	1998	
Percent of low-birthweight babies	8.7	8.5	40.0
Infant mortality rate	12.4	8.5	39.0
Child death rate	36.0	29.0	36.0
Rate of teen deaths by accident, homicide, and suicide	74.0	59.0	25.0
Teen birth rate	50.0	40.0	42.0
Percent of teens who are high school dropouts	12.0	13.0	45.0
Percent of teens not attending school and not working	12.0	9.0	30.0
Percent of children living with parents who do not have full-time, year-round employment	29.0	30.0	42.0
Percent of children in poverty	21.0	23.0	37.0
Percent of families with children headed by a single parent	26.0	31.0	44.0

Source: *Kids Count Data Book* (2001).



Kids Count Data Book provides at the national level. The most recent *Georgia Kids Count Fact Book* (2001) examines the relationship between a community's economy and the well-being of its children, using a system of classifying the economies of Georgia counties developed by the Department of Community Affairs. Based on economic variables related to unemployment, income, and poverty, the state's counties are placed into one of four tiers, ranging from the least-developed counties economically (tier 1) to the most developed (tier 4). The analysis indicates that children in economically stronger communities fare better on most indicators of child well-being than do their counterparts in economically weaker communities. The report concludes that there is a strong relationship between a community's performance on traditional indicators of economic development and a community's performance on indicators of social capital development.

The findings contained in the third report, *The Development Report Card* (Corporation for Enterprise Development 2000), are consistent with those in the *Georgia Kids Count Fact Book*. Using 73 statistical indicators, the Corporation for Enterprise Development (CFED) annually rates the economies of the 50 states, focusing on economic performance, business vitality, and development capacity. In the most recent *Report Card*, Georgia received a "B" in business vitality but was given a "C" in the other two areas: economic performance, which includes a subset of 9 "quality-of-life" indicators (e.g., infant mortality, teen pregnancy, and uninsured children), and development capacity, which contains a subset of 7 "human resources" indicators (e.g., performance on standardized educational tests, high school attainment, and high school graduation rates). In actual rankings contained in this report, Georgia ranked 49th in the disparity between the economies in urban and rural counties and in high school graduation rates, 45th in infant mortality and voting rates, and 42d in teen pregnancy and crime rates.

The three reports offer evidence that child well-being is an issue needing attention in Georgia. Clearly, the quality of life of Georgia's children, especially in rural counties, does not measure up to that for children in other states. CFED emphasizes that Georgia needs to invest more in quality of life and in human resources. Taken together, these reports suggest that state and local policymakers must marshal the resources necessary to invest in improving the well-being of children, especially if the economic growth the state has experienced over the past two decades is to be sustained and extended throughout the state.

This note suggests that investments in human capital and economic development need to be coordinated. A Family Connection collaborative representing business, civic organizations, the religious community, schools, families, local officials, and public and private service providers exists in nearly every county. These local partnerships plan for improved, measurable outcomes for children and select and implement strategies for achieving them. With regard to local economies, recent community and economic development initiatives in Georgia—including the Regional Advisory Councils (RACs), Georgia Rural Development Council, OneGeorgia Authority, and the state and regional boards created by the Workforce Investment Act—are also important. If linkages at the local, regional, and state levels are made between these economic development efforts and Family Connection, Georgia will be uniquely well positioned to ensure that issues of human capital development become a crucial component of planning for community, workforce, and economic development.

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Selected Resources

Annie E. Casey Foundation. 2001. *Kids Count Data Book*. Baltimore, Md.: Annie E. Casey Foundation. www.aecf.org.
Corporation for Enterprise Development. 2000. *The Development Report Card*. Washington, D.C.: CFED. www.cfed.org.
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