



BUILDING BETTER LIVES

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**Report Documents Today's Kids Better Off than 20 Years Ago**

*Voices for Illinois Children credits 20 years of advocacy for improvements*

**CHICAGO**—The well-being of Illinois children has improved dramatically in the past two decades on 20 significant measures of development, according to the “Illinois Kids Count 2008” report released today by Voices for Illinois Children. The annual look at data on children’s quality of life in Illinois shows:

- Twelve times more children go to preschool today than a generation ago, thanks to advocates and state leaders who have fought for policy changes such as Preschool for All.
- Sixty-seven percent fewer children are in substitute care today than 10 years ago because champions of at-risk children persuaded communities, lawmakers and families to work together to provide stable homes for children.
- Seventy percent more children are covered by public health insurance today than 10 years ago, as a result of 20 years of work to expand health programs for low-income children.

“Twenty years of data show that children growing up today are much better off than their counterparts a generation ago. Children’s well-being has improved significantly on virtually every measure,” said Jerry Stermer, president of Voices for Illinois Children. “This compares with a generation ago when research showed that Illinois kids ranked in the bottom 20 percent of virtually every national study of health, development, economic security and state funding for children.”

The “Illinois Kids Count 2008” report examines the quality of life for children statewide, in every county and in the City of Chicago. This year’s report reflects on how 20 years of work to change public policy has improved the well-being of 3 million Illinois children. Highlights include:

**Education**

For the past 20 years, Illinois preschool enrollment has steadily grown, increasing by 1,125 percent. This represents critical progress, in part because every dollar spent on

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high-quality, early childhood education today results in saving up to \$7 in community and social services later. Voices is a founding member of a statewide coalition of groups that support full implementation and funding of Preschool for All.

### **Children and Youth at Risk**

In 1997, more than 50,000 children in Illinois were in substitute care, compared with approximately 17,000 children today. Studies show children who have stable homes do better in school, are less likely to get in trouble and are more likely to be healthy. Voices continues to lead the “Foster Kids are Our Kids” public awareness campaign to change misperceptions about substitute care and build support for it in local communities.

### **Health and Development**

Illinois babies are getting healthier starts as more expectant moms get prenatal care. The proportion of pregnant women who received prenatal care grew from 78 percent in 1990 to more than 85 percent in 2004. In health insurance coverage, Illinois has made substantial progress to expand public programs for low-income children. In 2006, the state implemented the All Kids program, which made Illinois the first state to offer affordable health insurance to every uninsured child.

### **Family Economic Security**

Illinois instituted a state Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) in 2000, modeled after the federal tax credit that helps lift working-poor families out of poverty. Voices for Illinois Children, a leader of the “Make Work Pay” coalition, now is advocating for an increase in the state EITC. Between 1995 and 2001, the average monthly number of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) families in Illinois fell 73 percent. Illinois TANF caseloads dropped another 39 percent between 2001 and 2003.

### **Demographics**

Other “Illinois Kids Count” indicators reflect our state’s changing demographics. As one of 10 “gateway” states for immigrants, Illinois has seen the percentage of children in immigrant families rise from 14 percent in 1990 to 22 percent in 2005.

“While it’s gratifying to see our achievements over the last 20 years, our work is far from done. Illinois still lags behind the nation in education funding, and we see a desperate need for children’s mental health services,” Stermer said. “Overlaying those and the many other challenges that communities face is the fact that today one in five children in Illinois lives in an immigrant family. This underscores the importance of developing a broad range of programs that are culturally relevant and providing every child with access to a good education, affordable and quality health care, safe neighborhoods, and economic stability.”

**Editor’s Note:** For a copy of the “Illinois Kids Count 2008” report visit [www.voices4kids.org](http://www.voices4kids.org), or call Lisa Soard at 312-251-9929.

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*Voices for Illinois Children is a leader in advocating for kids and families. Our goal as a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization is to bring people together to help build better lives through public policies that support children, families and communities in Illinois.*