Moving Policy, Making Progress

ILLINOIS KIDS COUNT 2013

VOICES for Illinois Children
Voices for Illinois Children Board of Directors, 2012

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Illinois Kids Count Staff

YASMIN BAHARLOO
Project Assistant

QIAN CAO
Project Intern

LARRY JOSEPH
Director, Fiscal Policy Center

MANYA KHAN Assistant Director, Fiscal Policy Center

ANNE KLASSEMAN Project Manager

DAVID LLOYD
Policy Analyst, Fiscal Policy Center

MELISSA MEIGHEN Director of Communications

JONATHAN PHILIPP Project Intern

JOAN VITALE Director of Special Initiatives
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KIDS COUNT DATA CENTER
Foreword
Key Achievements
Our advocacy efforts have contributed to a wide range of key policy changes to promote children’s healthy development and create opportunities to enable children to reach their full potential. As *Illinois Kids Count 2013* shows, some of the most significant achievements have involved expanding access to early childhood education, health care coverage, and affordable child care. Other important gains have included substantially improving the child welfare system, establishing and strengthening the state Earned Income Tax Credit for low-income working families, and adopting social and emotional learning standards for Illinois public schools.

An essential tool for moving public policy is collaboration. In nearly every major issue area, we have led or participated in collaborative efforts, including the Illinois Early Learning Council, Illinois Childhood Trauma Coalition, Illinois Children’s Mental Health Partnership, Foster Kids Are Our Kids public awareness campaign, Youth to Adulthood Partnership, ACT Now Coalition for quality afterschool programs, Make Work Pay Coalition, and Responsible Budget Coalition.

Challenges and Opportunities
The Great Recession and the state’s prolonged fiscal crisis have reminded us that the process of building better lives for kids involves major challenges. Seemingly endless waves of budget cuts have eroded or undermined hard-won gains. As we look forward, we should maintain a long-term view, recognizing our successes and the significant progress that has weathered the storm.

Our prior accomplishments show that we can and must do better. We must reinvest in opportunities for children and continue towards the goal of ensuring that all children can reach their full potential. As always, this will take sustained advocacy. Even when we win a policy victory for children, that moment is never the end of the story. Hard work is needed to maintain and build on progress.

The findings in this report underline several major challenges that we must address to ensure a better future for children and families in Illinois:

**The continuing state fiscal crisis**: Essential programs in education, health care, and human services remain vulnerable to further budget cuts.
cuts. Pension obligations are consuming an ever growing share of the state budget. Current income tax rates are scheduled to be rolled back at the end of 2014, which would cause state revenues to plunge and further undermine investments in children and families. We need a comprehensive and balanced approach to the state budget crisis, which must include adequate and sustainable revenue, strategic spending restraints, and responsible pension reform.

Disturbing trends in child poverty: The child poverty rate in Illinois was nearly 22 percent in 2011, compared with less than 15 percent in 2000. Even more distressing is the fact that one out of four children under age 5 now lives in poverty. Even as the economy recovers, nationwide child poverty rates are likely to continue rising. We know that growing up in poverty, especially in early childhood, can harm children’s health, their cognitive and social-emotional development, and their economic opportunities as adults.¹

Racial-ethnic disparities in child well-being: This report documents persistent disparities on a wide range of indicators, including child poverty rates, family income, health outcomes, and educational attainment. We must make concerted efforts to ensure that children from all families and backgrounds have opportunities to develop their capacities and reach their full potential, as well as to become productive and responsible members of the broader community.

Children’s exposure to violence: In a given year, millions of children and adolescents across the nation experience violence—directly or indirectly—in their homes, schools, and communities.² There is growing recognition of the traumatic impact of exposure to violence—especially repeated exposure—on the physical, emotional, and cognitive development of children. Illinois must develop a comprehensive set of approaches to the prevention, reduction, and evidence-based treatment of children’s exposure to violence.

While we must address continuing and emerging challenges, we also need to recognize the opportunities before us. Illinois recently received a federal Race-to-the-Top Early Learning Challenge grant,
which will be used to improve the quality of early learning and child development programs. The Affordable Care Act is providing new resources to expand and strengthen home visiting programs for at-risk families with young children. The state’s Budgeting for Results initiative presents opportunities for advocates to highlight the imperative of investing in evidence-based programs.

Renewing Our Commitment

Illinois Kids Count is based on the premise that public policy should be guided by accurate information. Sound data, combined with effective communications and strong advocacy, can contribute to better outcomes for children and families. Data can be a powerful tool for identifying problems, monitoring existing programs, and bolstering the case for our policy priorities.1

Voices needs your help in a renewed commitment to building better lives for children. One of the most basic ways you can help is by spreading the message of the importance of public investments in children and families. We urge you to work together with others in your community. Engage with state and local public officials. And above all, become an active voice for Illinois children!

When we invest in all our children—not just the ones in our household or on our block—we all benefit from a vibrant economy, a stronger social fabric, and a brighter future. The entire state has a common interest in having healthy and well-educated children who become productive, contributing members of our communities. Likewise, we all have a shared responsibility to make kids a real priority, not just a talking point. We know what we must do: get back to basics by restoring and expanding investments in children, families, and communities. There are no gimmicks or shortcuts, only hard work. Let’s move ahead!

