EconoFact Chats: How Are America's Children Doing?
Leslie Boissiere, Annie E. Casey Foundation
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Michael Klein
I'm Michael Klein, executive editor of EconoFact, a non-partisan web-based publication of The Fletcher School at Tufts University. At EconoFact, we bring key facts and incisive analysis to the national debate on economic and social policies, publishing work from leading economists across the country. You can learn more about us and see our work at www.econofact.org.

Michael Klein
What do children need to thrive and grow into healthy, productive, and happy adults? Are families able to provide these conditions? Do communities? Do the local and federal governments? The Annie E. Casey Foundation focuses on children's well-being. Each year since 1990, they document how well children are doing nationally, and across states and ethnic groups, in their Kids Count Data Book. The 37th data book published in June of this year uses data up through 2024. It reports improvements in some areas, worsening situations in others, and divergences in the well-being of children across states and across racial and ethnic groups. To discuss the newest Kids Count Data Book and the well-being of children in the United States, I'm pleased to welcome back to an EconoFact Chat Leslie Boissiere, the Vice President for External Affairs at the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Leslie oversees the Foundation's Kids Count effort, as well as the areas of policy reform and advocacy, strategic communications, organizational effectiveness, and national partnerships. In the interest of full disclosure, the Annie E. Casey Foundation is a financial supporter of EconoFact. Leslie, thanks for joining me once again on EconoFact Chats.

Leslie Boissiere
Thank you for having me, Michael.

Michael Klein
Leslie, the Kids Count data book focuses on the four aspects of economic well-being: education, health, family, and community. How did you choose these areas, and how are children's well-being affected by each of them?

Leslie Boissiere
Well, Michael, the data book looks at 16 indicators, as you suggested, across four different domains. We look at economic well-being, education, health, and family and community. And the reason is because together they capture the conditions that shape children's opportunity to thrive. A child needs more than one single service. They need stable housing. They need adequate family income. They need access to health care and strong schools and also supporting

communities. All of those things matter. So we use these measures to help leaders see where children are doing well and where additional investments are needed.

Michael Klein
Over the almost 40 years that the Annie E. Casey Foundation has been doing this, has there been a change in the categories that you've looked at?

Leslie Boissiere
Yes, Michael, there have. In 1990, when we first started the first Kids Count data book, we used 10 indicators. And over time, we've refined how we measure child wellbeing as we learn more about children's development. So today we track 16 indicators, as I mentioned, across those four different domains. And then in 2026, we made another significant improvement. We introduce scores alongside state rankings. So rankings can tell us how one state is doing versus another. But what scores allow us to do is to compare children's progress over time on any particular indicators, or all the indicators. And we use 2019 as the baseline because that's the last year that we have complete data prior to the pandemic. And our goal is very straightforward – it's that we want to give policy makers and advocates and communities the most reliable information possible so they can make better decisions for children and families.

Michael Klein
So by using scores, you're allowing for not just a ranking, but also how much better is one situation than another, not just if it's better or not, right?

Leslie Boissiere
That's exactly right. It allows you to look over time at how children are doing, and it also gives you a sense of, are there additional investments needed in education, versus in economic wellbeing…so it gives a real indication of what's working for children, and where we may need additional interventions or supports for children and families.

Michael Klein
So the pandemic period was obviously very different. So if I could ask you to compare it pre-pandemic to the more recent data that you have, what changed? And in particular, what changed for the better and what changed for the worse?

Leslie Boissiere
So as you indicated in your introduction, Michael, it's a bit of a mixed bag. So if we look at economic well-being in 2024 versus 2019, the score increased, but only modestly – from 551 to 557. In other areas like family and community, we saw almost across the board increases in indicators. And in education, almost everything declined if you look at 2024 versus 2019. And

health again was a mixed bag. So in each of the different domains, we saw a different movement, and it's a very mixed picture with education being the area that's driving the most concern.

Michael Klein
Do you think that's a vestige of the lack of learning during the pandemic, and it's casting a long shadow on children's education now?

Leslie Boissiere
There's no one particular factor that we can attribute it to. We do know that the national education score dropped from 518 in 2019 to 417 in 2024. So that's a huge drop compared to some of the other areas. And we also know that there were only two states, ironically, two Southern states, that showed any improvement. And that was Mississippi and Louisiana, which are ranked 49th and 50th overall. But those were the two states that showed improvement. We do know that the pandemic absolutely disrupted schooling. But that can't be the sole explanation. We know that chronic absenteeism has been on the rise, that access to effective instruction matters, and even unmet basic needs all affect how a child enters the classroom and whether or not they're prepared to learn. So, all of those things have had an impact. And, in particular, we have seen declines in fourth grade reading and eighth grade math that we know are directly tied to how well a child will do over time…whether or not they'll graduate from high school on time, and whether or not they're going to be successful in school and work and in life.

Michael Klein
One issue is the child poverty rate. The child poverty rate was dramatically reduced during the pandemic, despite the fact that the economy weakened. And that's attributable to the increase in government support. Do you think that suggests that more persistent government support could lead to a persistent decline in child poverty?

Leslie Boissiere
Well, Michael, here's what we know. The pandemic showed us that public policy can make a meaningful difference for families, even during an economic downturn. So temporary expansions of support helped reduce child poverty during that time. The lesson is that policy choices matter. The child tax credit is an important example of a tool that can help parents afford everyday necessities. And so we should assess programs through reliable evidence, understand which children and families benefit, and consider how do we sustain those effective supports.

Michael Klein
So the reliable analysis is exactly what you and people at the Annie E. Casey Foundation are trying to do with your annual reports, right?

Leslie Boissiere
That's exactly right. The report is intended to give a snapshot and a comparison over time. What is the data telling us about the wellbeing of children? And there are other evidence and evaluations and other types of research that can look at what caused those differences. We do know that when the child tax credit was expanded, we saw a historic reduction in child poverty. So we do know that there are policies that absolutely have an impact on child well-being, including on child poverty. And it's important for us to continue to study what is working, what's working well, who benefits, and how do we support and sustain those programs that we know are effective.

Michael Klein
There's also in your most recent report a mixed message about children's health. There are worse scores for the categories of low birth weight babies, and child and teen deaths, and a better score for child and teen obesity, and a more or less stable score for health insurance coverage. While the data are not yet available, recent cuts in Medicaid and SNAP would likely make these indicators worse when we have more recent data. Would you agree with that?

Leslie Boissiere
Well, we know that the health picture, Michael, as you suggested, is mixed. The 2026 data book reflects conditions through 2024, so it doesn't show the effects of H.R. 1, which was passed and showed -- and included changes in Medicaid eligibility requirements, for example. We know that 94 percent of children had health insurance in 2024, while 4.6 million children did not. And that was a decline from the 95 percent coverage rate that we saw during the pandemic. And the importance of during the pandemic is because we had continuous coverage protections in place during that time. And so we did see 95 percent of children having access to health care. We know that access to health care and nutritional food is fundamental to children's development. So reductions in healthcare coverage or nutrition assistance can make it harder for families to meet these essential needs. And we can't yet determine the full effect on the indicators that are tracked in the data book. While we can't determine the full effects of the indicators as we track in the data book, there is new research that's come out that's giving us an indication that things are not moving in the right direction. On November 9th, Georgetown University Center for Children and Families released research that raised additional concerns about declining enrollment in Medicaid and CHIP, which are the two programs that support low income families in terms of health coverage. And the findings underscore why we have to continue to monitor changes in children's access to healthcare, as well as nutrition assistance and use that evidence to guide policy decisions in providing resources to children and families.

Michael Klein
Our most recent memo that was published this week, we're speaking on November 20th, was by Diane Schanzenbach, who is at Georgetown University, and she documented the fall in enrollment in SNAP and especially how much that's affecting children. One of the things I found really interesting in that was when you look at low birth [weight], that casts a very long shadow on children's subsequent ability to do well in school and to thrive as adults. So I think that's something where people who aren't in the field don't understand how important or how detrimental low birth weight can be for subsequent outcomes. Leslie, there was one broad category where there was improvement across the indicators, and that was family and community. Do you have any idea why this group of indicators all showed improvement or at least not a deterioration?

Leslie Boissiere
Sure. So we saw progress on three of the four indicators in the family and community domain. We know that the overall score improved substantially from 518 in 2019 to 608 in 2024. Teen birth rate fell 24 percent, as well as the share of children living in high-poverty neighborhoods, which declined 22 percent. The percentage of children living in families where the household head lacks a high school diploma decreased from 12 percent to 11 percent. But the share of children living in single parent families remained unchanged at 34%. So the largest improvements came from declines in teen births and the share of children living in high poverty neighborhoods. And the teen birth rate has been declining since the early 1990s. And this trend is associated with a number of factors, increased education and pregnancy prevention efforts, greater access to effective contraception, delayed sexual activity, and broader economic and cultural changes. The decline in children living in high-poverty neighborhoods likely reflects a combination of broader economic growth, as well as federal policy interventions. And the increase in parents with high school diplomas also reflects a longer-term trend toward higher educational attainment. But the trend suggests that progress is possible when families and communities have access to economic opportunities, when they have access to education, and effective public policies. And the important question that we should be asking ourselves in this moment is, how do we sustain that progress, and ensure it reaches more children?

Michael Klein
Just to reiterate, the information in the latest Kids Count data book is through 2024. So we don't have the last year and a half or two years of data, correct?

Leslie Boissiere
That's exactly right. So some of the affordability challenges that we're seeing today wouldn't have been captured as of 2024, which is the most recent year that we have comparable data for all 50 states.

Michael Klein
Well, speaking of that, you have data disaggregated by states, but also disaggregated by racial and ethnic groups. Can you briefly describe the differences found across the racial and ethnic groups?

Leslie Boissiere
Well, Michael, the data show significant differences in how children are faring across racial and ethnic groups. For example, in 2024, 29% of black children and 26% of American Indian or Alaska Native children lived in poverty. And that's compared with 15% of children nationally and only 10% of white children. We also see differences in education and housing affordability. 84% of black 4th graders and 80% of latino 4th graders were not proficient in reading, compared with 61% of white 4th graders. And 45% of black children and 40% of latino children lived in households with high housing costs, and that's compared to only 22% of white children. So these differences help us understand where children and families face barriers, and where additional attention and investment are needed. Again, our goal is to use reliable data to ensure progress reaches all children, regardless of their background, where they live, their race, or their ethnicity.

Michael Klein
The Kids Count book also disaggregates statistics by states and regions of the country. What differences did you find there?

Leslie Boissiere
Well, Michael, the fact is that where children live matters. And the data in the Data Book consistently demonstrate that that's true. So New Hampshire had the highest overall score, 838. The highest possible score is 1,000. So New Hampshire was at 838. And Mississippi had the lowest at only 271. But regionally, differences also play out. Five of the seven highest scoring states were in the Northeast. And 11 of the 15 lowest scoring states were in the South. But rankings are only part of the story. So we saw South Carolina, which is in the South where most of the states had very low scores – improve its overall score by 38 points, and that was the largest gain of any state in the country. And the differences point to the importance of state and local policy choices, and they show why measuring progress over time is so essential.

Michael Klein
You talked about the differences in state policies. One state policy that got a lot of attention goes back to what you said earlier, that in Mississippi they made some important changes in education policy and it really has shown up in greater educational attainment for children. So I guess that's one example of how state policies can in fact help out children and can have a very positive effect.

Leslie Boissiere
Absolutely, Michael. There's been a lot written and told about what's been called the ‘Mississippi Miracle.’ Mississippi offers a very encouraging example of what sustained attention to literacy can accomplish. In 2013, they passed the Literacy-Based Promotion Act, and it focused on improving reading proficiency by the end of third grade. There were lots of provisions in it requiring screening students in kindergarten, paying attention to third grade reading difficulties, providing intensive instruction, literary coaches, teacher training, early childhood education, accountability measures like district report card systems. So lots of interventions that were put in place. And as a result, Mississippi is ranked 16th nationally in education. And this is a state that ranks overall 50th in the nation. So it's an encouraging story of how sustained investment in a particular area at the state level can absolutely show an effect on children's wellbeing and on the scores in the Data Book related to that particular intervention.

Michael Klein
A friend of mine who's a development economist who looks across the world at countries that are poor, countries that are rich, makes the statement that ability is evenly distributed, but opportunity is not. And I guess it's relevant here that part of the source of opportunity is government programs. Leslie, to what extent do you think government programs can positively affect the kinds of things that you analyze in the Kids Count book. Which programs do you think are most effective, and which less so, and for whom? You've already mentioned the Mississippi Miracle. Are there other examples as well?

Leslie Boissiere
Michael, we know that government programs can make a significant difference in children's lives, and we do have strong evidence of what works. We spoke earlier about the temporary expansion of the Child Tax Credit in 2021, which helped lift millions of children out of poverty. Medicaid and CHIP, Children's Health Insurance Program, also known as CHIP, have also played an important role in expanding access to healthcare. In fact, during the pandemic, when we had provisions in place that required continuous coverage protections, 95% of children had health insurance, and that's dropped to 94% in 2024. And we talked also about the research from Georgetown University that documents declining enrollment in CHIP and Medicaid among children, which underscores the importance of protecting the gains that we've made in healthcare. These programs show us what's possible when we make sustained investments in children and families, but we also have to understand which approaches are most effective for whom and under what circumstances. And that's where reliable public data and rigorous evaluation are essential. The Kids Count Data Book helps us track outcomes, while other research can help establish whether particular policies cause those improvements. And look, not every program works equally well for every population or every community. And that's why it's important to evaluate outcomes and adjust approaches based on what the evidence tells us. And as a foundation, we know that philanthropy has an important role in supporting research and

testing promising approaches, but public investment is what allows effective programs to reach children and families at scale.

Michael Klein
Well, the Annie E. Casey Foundation can take some credit for provision of data that actually changed policies and had a good effect. In the book, you mentioned how advocates in New Mexico use data from the Kids Count data book to make a successful case for increasing the state child tax credit. Do you know how did they argue for their position using the data that you provided?

Leslie Boissiere
New Mexico is a great example of how data can inform practical policy decisions. It ranked 49th overall, but its child well-being score rose 22 points, with particularly strong progress in economic well-being. And we know that state, for over a decade, has continuously advocated for programs that will support the well-being of kids and families and provide economic support in particular for families. Data-driven recommendations and advocacy helped inform the state's expansion of its child tax credit in 2023. And that policy gives families more resources to meet the needs such as food and housing and childcare. And the broader lesson is that good data helps identify needs, but it can also shape solutions that allow continued progress.

Michael Klein
The use of your data was very powerful. But in the foreword of your report, the president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Lisa Lawson, raises concerns about cuts to federal data collection, access to data, access to funding and staffing. Federal data is a source of much of the data that is used in your analysis. And we know that, for example, with SNAP, there's going to be a cutback in food insecurity information. What else would be lost if these data were no longer available?

Leslie Boissiere
Michael, the bottom line is that without reliable federal data, we say we're flying blind. We lose the ability to tell the story of child well-being in America. Policymakers don't have the information they need to assess whether policies and programs are working and whether resources are reaching the children and families who need them most. Communities lack the data to plan essential services and infrastructure. Investments in schools, investments in other community supports are based on reliable federal data at the state and the local level. And that includes hospitals and playgrounds and health clinics. All those decisions are based on the federal data that's made available. And advocates also lose critical evidence to make the case…to help educate policymakers on what's going to be the most effective investments that can improve the lives of children. 9 of the data book's 16 indicators, for example, are based on the American Community Survey in some form. The Census Bureau released the delayed 2025 ACS one-year estimates and supplemental estimates on October 29, 2026. Releasing the delayed data is

certainly welcome progress as there was a point where we weren't sure that we would have the one year estimates, which again is the basis for providing the Data Book. But we haven't seen release dates yet for the 2021 through 2025 five year estimates, or other things that are important for us in assessing the wellbeing of children and providing the annual Data Book. Five-year estimates are especially important for understanding conditions in smaller communities where a one-year estimate won't give you an accurate picture. We're also watching a proposed rule for the 2030 census, which would remove race and ethnicity questions from the decennial census questionnaire, which is used to count the population. Although it wouldn't prohibit collecting the information through the ACS or other surveys, we know that all the survey instruments are based on the decennial census and what that population looks at, not only in aggregate, but on a disaggregated basis. So because those surveys rely on population benchmarks from the decennial census, the proposed changes could make future demographic estimates less accurate. We could in 2030, be looking back 10 years to a population count to tell us what the demographic makeup of the country is. And we know that demographics are fluid, that this country is changing in real time. And so it's important that we have demographic data to tell a true picture of who lives where in this country, and what the demographic makeup looks like.

Michael Klein
Well, Leslie, thank you for talking with me today about this really vital issue. And especially thank you and your colleagues at the Annie E. Casey Foundation for publishing this very important Kids Count data book each year, which helps focus attention on what Nelson Mandela called our society's soul – the way in which we treat our children.

Leslie Boissiere
Michael, thank you for your continued coverage of the Data Book and for giving us an opportunity to shine a spotlight on the well-being of children, and why data is an important way to tell that story.

Michael Klein
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