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Look north, not west, for a path to better child outcomes

The Annie E. Casey Foundation released its 2019 Kids Count Data Book last month, and once again Louisiana is ranked near the bottom - 49th of the 50 states - for the well-being of children. Louisiana children are poorer, less healthy and more likely to struggle in school than their counterparts in other states. These deficits can create lifelong barriers that keep people from reaching their full potential.

For solutions to these chronic problems, Louisiana policymakers often look to our western neighbor, Texas, which has higher per-capita incomes and a reputation for low taxes and regulation. But if Louisiana truly wants to improve on the Kids Count rankings, and ultimately put more children on a path to opportunity, a better template comes from Arkansas.

Arkansas [expanded Medicaid in 2013](#) and also has a statewide minimum wage above the federal minimum. These policies have helped improve economic well-being of children and contributed to Arkansas climbing several spots in the Kids Count rankings - even surpassing Texas. The Natural State has improved on every metric with the exception of "Family and Community," where it still has ranked above Louisiana and Texas.

Texas, meanwhile, joins Louisiana as one of the states that still defaults to the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 and also forbids cities and towns from raising wages on their own. Unlike Louisiana, Texas has yet to expand Medicaid and has no state income tax. While these policies may benefit large corporations, they make it harder to make the kinds of public investments that lead to better outcomes for children.

In two years, Arkansas has surpassed Louisiana and Texas in nearly every Kids Count metric

	Arkansas		Louisiana		Texas	
	2017	2019	2017	2019	2017	2019
Economic Well-Being	47	36	49	50	32	39
Education	35	32	47	48	30	30
Health	46	37	49	42	39	39
Family and Community	44	45	48	48	47	47
Overall Ranking	45	40	48	49	41	41

Source: Annie E. Casey Foundation



The annual Kids Count report breaks down U.S. Census Bureau data¹ and other metrics to rank states on how children fare on Economic Well-Being, Education, Health, Family & Community. Together these rankings form an Overall Child Well-Being score. Louisiana's overall ranking fell from 48th to 49th since 2017.

While Louisiana has long languished near the bottom of the overall rankings, the Arkansas experience shows that states can take big strides to improve childrens' lives. Louisiana has already done this on some measures. For example, the state has one of the lowest rates of uninsured children in the nation. On many other measures, however, the state continues to fail its most important residents:

Economic Well-Being

Louisiana Ranking - 50th

Comprising metrics: *children in poverty, children whose parents lack secure employment, children living in households with a high housing cost burden, teens not in school and not working*

Louisiana ranks 50th in Economic Well-being for the second year in a row after dropping from 49th in 2017. This is mostly due to Louisiana's child poverty rate, which is the highest in the country at 28%. Since 2010, Louisiana's child poverty rate has held steady, and at times gotten worse, while the national rate decreased by four percentage points. Childhood poverty can have lifelong impacts on education levels, health and future earnings. Despite the dismal news on child poverty, Louisiana has improved in some categories. More children now live in households with parents who are securely employed, fewer children live in households burdened by high housing costs, and more teens are either in school or working.

Meanwhile, Arkansas has jumped from 47th to 36th in just two years, with big improvements in every category. The child poverty rate has decreased from 27% to 22%. The percentage of children whose parents lack secure employment has dropped six points in Arkansas, and the percentage of kids living in households with high housing cost burdens decreased by five points.

Kids Count rankings are based on the most recent Census data, meaning it is a year-and-a-half behind. Therefore, these economic gains in Arkansas happened between 2015 and 2017, when the state minimum wage increased from \$6.25 to \$8.50 an hour. [This minimum wage increase resulted in higher wages, higher sales tax collections, and coincided with record low unemployment rates](#) for the state. During Louisiana's 2019 legislative session, there were numerous attempts to address the minimum wage. Both the minimum wage increase and preemption bills were quickly killed - [while Arkansas voters approved a ballot measure to further increase their minimum wage to \\$11 by 2021](#).

28%

of Louisiana children live in poverty, compared to the national average of 18%



¹ Most recent Census data is from 2017, so all Kids Count books are based on two-year-old data. Ex: 2019 Kids Count is from 2017 data, 2017 Kids Count is from 2015 data

Education

Louisiana Ranking - 48th

Comprising metrics: *Young children (3 and 4) not in school, fourth-graders not proficient in reading, eighth-graders not proficient in math, high school students not graduating on time*

A bright spot for Louisiana is the percentage of young children attending school. Only 48% of 3 and 4-year-old children are not in school, which is the second lowest rate in the South and one of the lowest in the country outside of the Northeast. This is largely due to the Cecil J. Picard LA 4 Early Childhood program, which [serves 16,000 low-income 4-year-old children](#), and the Louisiana's Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) which serves children 0-3.

Prioritizing Early Childhood Education through these state programs has made Louisiana a national leader in ensuring 4-year-olds have access to high-quality child care and preschool. Increasing access for 3-year-olds would further decrease this rate and likely make Louisiana a national leader in access to early childhood education.

Louisiana fares much worse after children start kindergarten, which brings down the state's overall education ranking. Louisiana has steadily dropped from 45th place nearly every year since the Kids Count Databook began ranking states by education in 2012. This drop in rankings has coincided with Louisiana's stagnant per-pupil spending. The state has only increased spending for school districts two times in over a decade, the most recent (for the 2019-20 school year) coming too late to be included in this year's rankings.

Arkansas ranked 32nd and Texas 30th in education. Both Arkansas (\$6,713) and Texas (\$5,140) provide more state support, per student, than Louisiana's \$3,160. But even though their state per-pupil spending is higher, they spend less overall per student. This is partially due to their lower child poverty rates which results in less federal money. Arkansas also has a school spending formula that is much more centralized than Louisiana, with 86% [percent of school district revenues deriving from the state in Arkansas, compared to 48% in Louisiana](#). Such centralization likely allows the state to pool resources and direct funding where it is most needed, ensuring that every school district, regardless of wealth, has the money necessary to provide a quality education. [Fortunately, Louisiana made investments in both teacher pay and per pupil spending during the 2019 session.](#)

Health

Louisiana Ranking - 42nd

Comprising metrics: *Low birth-weight babies, children without health insurance, child and teen deaths per 100,000, teens who abuse alcohol or drugs*

3%

of Louisiana children are without health insurance, one of the lowest rates in the nation

Louisiana jumped from 49th to 42nd in two years in the health rankings. This large jump coincided with Louisiana's first two years of Medicaid expansion, [which has a proven track record of impacting health and development outcomes for children](#) even

though it's adults who are covered through expansion. In particular, the percentage of children without health insurance in Louisiana has dropped to one of the lowest in the country at 3%. Arkansas, who has also expanded Medicaid, boasts a similarly low rate of 4%, while Texas (which has not expanded Medicaid) has the highest rate of uninsured children in the country at 11%. These statistics reflect the research on the effects of Medicaid expansion, [which suggest that adults with access to healthcare are more likely to enroll their children in Children's Health Insurance Program \(CHIP\) and are more likely to take children to healthcare providers for wellness visits.](#)

Since 2010, Louisiana has not improved on any other metric. The rate of teens who abuse alcohol or drugs and the percent of babies born with low birth-weights have been stagnant, while child and teen death rates have gone up.

Family and Community

Louisiana Ranking - 48th

Comprising metrics: *Children in single-parent families, children in families where the household head lacks a high school diploma, children living in high-poverty areas, teen births per 1,000*

Although Louisiana has remained 48th since 2017 in Family and Community, the state has improved on two crucial metrics. Since 2010, Louisiana has seen a surge in household heads holding at least a high school diploma. And Louisiana's teen pregnancy rate, while still high, is dropping faster than the national average. But Louisiana's children are also increasingly likely to live in high-poverty neighborhoods. Currently, 226,000 Louisiana live in high-poverty communities, which can have a significant impact on their development. [Children living in high-poverty neighborhoods are more likely to experience financial instability, witness violence and crime, and attend underfunded and low-performing schools.](#)

Louisiana joins all Southeastern states in faring poorly in the Family and Community ranking. Louisiana joins Texas, Arkansas and Mississippi at the bottom of the list.

There is a clear path forward...

The 2019 Kids Count Databook is a report filled with numbers. But these figures tell a story, which is that states that choose to make smart investments in low- and moderate income families see better outcomes for children.

Louisiana's improvements in the health and early childhood rankings are a direct result of investments and policy choices made by elected officials. But our state's bottom-of-the-barrel results in other categories also reflects misplaced priorities on the part of our leaders.

13%

of Louisiana children live with head of households that lack a high school diploma, a significant drop from 17% in 2010



At the root of Louisiana's problems is poverty, which correlates strongly with [education](#) and [health](#) outcomes and overall well-being of children. Expanding Medicaid was an important step in the right direction, but there is much work to be done in lifting wages and creating a more fair and adequate tax structure that can support new investments.

Fortunately for Louisiana, some of the solutions to these problems can be found just beyond our northern border.

- **By Neva Butkus**