

# The Birmingham News

## Alabama 45th of 50 for child well-being in 2012 Kids Count Data Book

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Alabama made its best showing ever in an annual ranking of child well-being, but it still came in 45th among the 50 states.

The 2012 Kids Count Data Book released today by the **Annie E. Casey Foundation** showed Alabama made gains in education but continues to struggle with high rates of child poverty. The report ranked Alabama 45th, the state's best ranking since the Data Book began publication in 1990.

"While ranking 45th in child well-being is not cause for celebration when viewed alone, the fact that the state is making progress is encouraging," said Linda Tilly, executive director of Voices for Alabama's Children.

This year's report examined 16 indicators of child well-being, including child poverty, percentage of □ children in preschool and fourth-grade reading proficiency. Previous reports looked at only 10 factors, so the organization discouraged direct comparison to previous years, when Alabama ranked 48th.

But Tilly said, "It is the best we've ever been and using a more complete measure." Tilly said the report showed "both progress and challenges for Alabama."

Perhaps the brightest spot in the report, Tilly said, was the state's improvement in all four education indicators.

"Ultimately, I think when we do a good job of educating our children, we can break the cycle of generation(al) poverty," Tilly said.

One of the biggest improvements came in the reading proficiency of fourth-graders. The percentage of fourth-graders not proficient in reading fell from 78 percent in 2005 to 69 percent in 2011. That comes close to the national percentage of 68 percent.

Jim Carnes, communications director for Alabama Arise, an advocacy group for low-income families, said the numbers were "encouraging."

"They show that long-haul efforts targeting specific goals, such as improving reading skills, can make a difference," Carnes said.

But the state also is facing some stark challenges, Tilly said, particularly in child poverty.

More than one in four Alabama children live in households at or below the federal poverty line. Twenty-eight percent of Alabama children lived in poverty in 2010, compared to a national rate of 22 percent.

"It really is a pretty startling percentage," Tilly said.

Child poverty in Alabama also is growing worse, according to the report, jumping from 25 percent in 2008.

"The report also shows that only one set of measures -- those for economic well-being -- are moving entirely in the wrong direction for Alabama's children and families. That in itself is cause for hope that as the economy turns around, this year's small improvements in other areas of children's lives will gain momentum," Carnes said.

Tilly said that, while there always are families that have been living in poverty for generations, she believed the state now is seeing more families in "situational" poverty.

"Through situations -- job loss, housing foreclosure ... that these children now live in poverty," Tilly said.