

To Improve Wellbeing in Children, State Policy Matters Most

Recent reports on child wellbeing in the U.S. ranked Texas in the bottom tier among states. A new analysis finds differences in state policy—including in areas such as education, children’s health care, and revenue— account for most of the problem.

On July 27th, the Annie E. Casey Foundation released its *2010 Kids Count Data Book*, which found that Texas ranked 34th among states in child wellbeing. In April 2008, using a different set of indicators, the Every Child Matters Education Fund published a report ranking Texas 46th in overall child wellbeing.

With the goal of determining *why* Texas consistently ranks poorly in child wellbeing, Texans Care for Children examined key indicators identified in both reports and their relationship with various policy issues affecting the 50 states. In particular, the analysis relied on multiple regression analysis and correlations in a dozen data indicators from the Annie E. Casey Foundation KIDS COUNT Data Center,ⁱ the Washington D.C.-based Tax Foundation,ⁱⁱ and the Pew Hispanic Center.ⁱⁱⁱ The objective was to uncover (1) any links between positive or negative outcomes for children and statewide policy decisions that affect children, which vary by state; and (2) whether federal immigration policy has a decisive impact on overall child wellbeing in the states. Indicators that were found to have statistically significant links to indicators of child wellbeing such as mortality rates among children, poverty levels, and teen births, included per capita local and state tax rates, access to health care for children, and high school graduation rates. However, the data showed no discernable relationship between the share of unauthorized immigrants in a state’s population or the percentage of children in immigrant families and worse outcomes for children.

Only one state in 2007 had the combination of a high child immigrant population and a high poverty rate among children: Texas. The common denominator for states with high levels of child poverty is low levels of public investment.

Findings

States with lower per capita tax payments rank worse for child deaths and have more teen deaths. Lower levels of per capita tax payment in states were strongly correlated with statistical significance to higher fatality rates for children, and especially teenagers. A state’s investment in public structures, including roads and other infrastructure, may affect factors that are among the leading causes of fatalities in young people, such as car accidents. (No link was found between per capita taxes and infant mortality.)

States where fewer children have health care coverage are likely to experience somewhat higher child and teen death rates.

The analysis showed that the share of children lacking health coverage in a state's population has a moderate but statistically significant correlation with higher deaths among both teens and children. Researchers have found that not having access to health coverage makes a patient nearly twice as vulnerable to death in critical circumstances, compared to patients who have health coverage. Texas continues to rank 23rd in preventing teen deaths and 27th in preventing child deaths, while having the lowest rate of health coverage for children in the nation.

States with lower levels of high school completion have higher levels of child poverty and higher teen birth rates.

Many teen births are to single mothers who must drop out of high school to raise their children, and many children in poverty are poor because their parents lack a high-school education, which is required for higher-paying work. Therefore, it is unsurprising that high school completion overlaps significantly with indicators of wellbeing such as economic security and preventing teen births. Texas ranks 48th in the percentage of children living with parents who have more than a high school education, 48th in preventing births among teenagers, and 43rd in keeping children out of poverty.

Higher rates of teen births occur in states with lower per capita taxes.

Higher rates of births to teens, ages 15-19, in a state may be problematic to the wellbeing of both the children of the teen parents and the teens themselves. Research has found having a child too soon or being the child of a young mother impacts health, economic security, and educational outcomes in children. This regression analysis found a statistically significant correlation between states with lower per capita tax investments and those with higher teen birth rates.

The presence of more unauthorized immigrants in the population does not help predict any of the indicators of statewide child wellbeing.

States have significant variance in the share of their population estimated to be immigrants who entered the country illegally. This analysis found that none of the dependent variables had statistically significant correlations with the presence or absence of unauthorized immigrants. In fact, among the states in the top 10 for the highest percentage of estimated unauthorized immigrants, only three appear in the bottom 10 for *any* primary indicators of child wellbeing; Texas is the only state in this category to rank near the bottom on more than one child wellbeing indicator.¹

Although children in immigrant families (authorized and unauthorized) do have disproportionately poor outcomes as a group, *states* with more children in immigrant communities on the whole fared better in child wellbeing. Texas was the only exception, for example, ranking in the top 10 for both high levels of child poverty and high levels of children in immigrant families. (By contrast, four states ranked

¹ Georgia ranks 7th in estimated percentage of unauthorized immigrants and 42nd in preventing infant mortality. Arizona ranks 2nd in unauthorized immigrants and 40th in preventing teen births. Texas ranks 5th in estimated unauthorized immigrants, 48th in preventing teen births, and 43rd in preventing child poverty.

lowest for child immigrant populations appeared in the top 10 for child poverty, and two states ranked highest in child immigrant population appeared in the *bottom* 10 for child poverty.)

Conclusion

A variety of complex factors influence child wellbeing. This analysis provides only a limited examination of those complexities, but it mirrors findings in earlier research. Child wellbeing at a state level has much to do with matters that state policymakers can influence --such as the quality of education in a state, economic factors such as the availability of jobs, investments in public structures that benefit communities (including children), and health care access. By contrast, issues outside state lawmakers' control, such as federal immigration policy, appear not to affect overall wellbeing in a state's children. Texas is unique among states, with both an economy strong enough to continue to attract immigrants from other countries for work and factors that make it an unwelcoming environment for children. As federal lawmakers work to improve immigration policy for the nation as a whole, including Texas, state lawmakers can likewise improve wellbeing for children, with a clear focus on the economic, educational, and social policies that matter most for ensuring children's success.

ⁱ Annie E. Casey Foundation, "KIDS COUNT Data Center: Data Across States," Accessed August 5 and August 11, 2010. Online at: <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/>

ⁱⁱ The Tax Foundation, "State-Local Tax Burdens, All States, 2008," Accessed August 11, 2010. Online at: <http://www.taxfoundation.org/taxdata/show/336.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Passel, Jeffrey S. and D'Vera Cohn. 2009. [A Portrait of Unauthorized Immigrants in the United States](#). Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, April.