



## USING KIDS COUNT DATA: TURNING INFORMATION INTO ACTION

Improving the health and well-being of children and their families requires an understanding of the circumstances and environment in which they live. This information can assist in communicating the needs of children, resulting in stronger policies and programs. How can you use Kids Count in your community?

### / **Get the Facts**

There are many sources of data about your community. Kids Count compiles a data book each year that focuses on key indicators that research suggests matter to the quality of life for children and families. The data book combines data from many different sources to produce a profile of each county in the state and the City of Detroit with indicators related to:

- < family income and employment
- < child care and family support
- < the health of babies and children
- < child abuse and neglect
- < the health and well-being of youth
- < education

This year's Kids Count in Michigan data book includes a special section on children with disabilities, including county-level data from the 2000 Census, as well as updates for the background indicators about lead poisoning, birth defects, hospitalization for asthma, and children receiving Special Education and Supplemental Security Income.

### / **Analyze the Information**

You don't have to be a researcher to analyze information, you just have to take some time to examine what the data are saying about your community. The information itself is just the tip of the iceberg. The data book allows discussion of the inter-relatedness among different pieces of information, and a look at the broader picture of the status of children and families within a community. Community members understand the implications of local activities on the information, and can make some educated judgments about why certain things are true about children and families locally. To analyze, you can:

#### **Compare trends and rankings for different issues.**

- < Look at the information that has particular relevance to your work. For example, if you are running a child abuse and neglect prevention program, you would be particularly interested in information related to child safety and family support. Or if your community collaborative has identified teen pregnancy as a target issue, trends in teen births might be a focus. Think also about the indicators that affect issues that you are specifically concerned about, the economic status of families influences many other outcomes, such as health and education.
- < Look at community trends. The data book allows you to look at what has happened over time for many indicators. Has the situation of children and families improved in your community, or worsened?

## **Compare your county to similar counties, the state or the nation.**

- < Compare with other communities or the state. The data book provides rankings on many of the indicators available. These ranks allow comparisons with other counties (you may want to compare regionally, or to communities with similar attributes, such as population size and diversity), and can help you get a sense of where there are particular community successes or challenges. For example, if your county ranks right in the middle for most of the indicators, but ranks in the top ten for one, that may signify some real success in that area.
- < Compare with a national or state average. On all indicators in the data book, there are state rates for comparison. Comparison to national rates can be made through the National Kids Count project for several measures, such as infant mortality and teen births. The Michigan page of the national Kids Count book -- available at [www.kidscount.org](http://www.kidscount.org) -- provides Michigan rankings compared to other states and trends in comparison to the nation.
- < Compare to a standard or benchmark. In addition to averages, there are national or local standards for comparison on some measures. One example are the Healthy People Goals, through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Those goals are established every ten years for many health-related indicators. Some communities have set local goals or standards where they can use Kids Count data to assess progress.

## **Supplement the data with local information.**

- < Understand the local landscape. What do you know about local events (loss of employers, end of a program, new funding, etc.) that may have had an impact on a particular indicator? What are existing or potential strategies to improve outcomes on that indicator?
- < Gather other information about your community. The data book is limited to information available consistently across all counties in Michigan. Many communities do local needs assessments, surveys and other activities to gather information about their programs and residents.
- < Determine what the information does NOT tell you. What more would you need to find out to determine what has made an impact on that indicator in your community?

## **/ Use the information**

**Prioritize issues for action.** Whether you are on a community planning team, implementing a program for children and families, or just trying to figure out what you can do to help, it makes sense to base your strategy on facts and information rather than rhetoric or myth. The data book provides you with information about many facets of community life for children and families, and your analysis of the information leads you to recognize issues of critical need, or to capitalize on past success.

**Work with the media.** The media are a great avenue to draw attention to an issue in your community. The release of Kids Count data books receive a great deal of media attention from print, radio and television outlets. Communities can take advantage of this situation to insert local messages into the initial Kids Count story, or extend the coverage beyond the publication of the report itself. The theme of childhood disability gives some opportunity to make your programs or initiatives targeted toward that group more widely known and give you additional visibility as an information source. Often the media focus on the “bad news,” which may overshadow the work that local groups are doing to improve their community.

By acting proactively with local media around the information in the data book, you may be able to help the press amplify local efforts, draw attention to successful programs or important issues that help to frame policy or other advocacy work.

- < Look at the data for press angles — what is the theme or message for the data book; where have there been significant changes or trends in your community’s data; what is the good news about your community; what are the challenges.
- < Figure out how your organization/initiative fits into the story. Do you have a program that has contributed to the good news, or is trying to face the challenges?
- < Recruit people to share their stories about your organization/initiative.
- < Timing is everything. Kids Count usually releases the data book information with an embargo for the release date when the story will actually appear in the media. Reporters and editors will be given the “embargoed” information prior to the date so they have time to pull the story together. They always want to develop the local angle, so the day or so before a release are the most critical to be communicating with the media about a story, or being available for media requests. The *Kids Count in Michigan Data Book 2003* will be released in January 2004.
- < Maintain connections with the media. Revisit media contacts periodically, giving them a fresh angle on the information about your community.

## **Good Luck!**

### **For more information and help with your work:**

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*Kids Count in Michigan is part of a broad national effort to measure the well-being of children at the state and local levels, and use that information to shape efforts to improve the lives of children. Since 1992, Kids Count in Michigan has published annual data books profiling the well-being of children in Michigan. Although the measures used in the data book cannot capture the full range of conditions shaping children’s lives, they: 1. reflect a wide range of factors affecting the well-being of children; 2. reflect experiences across a range of developmental stages; 3. allow comparison because they are consistent across counties and over time; 4. are considered important through research and by the public and policy makers; and 5. have clear policy implications where prevention and intervention are possible.*

*The Michigan League for Human Services and Michigan’s Children are partners in the Kids Count effort, and work to ensure that the information provided in the data book is used throughout Michigan for community planning, to bring needed attention to critical issues, and to drive public policy advocacy around issues of concern.*