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The Aloha State is ranked 25th based on the well-being of keiki in a yearly report on U.S. children

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The high cost of housing helped push down Hawaii's rank for child well-being in the annual KIDS COUNT report, while keiki in the islands fared better on health measures than their mainland counterparts.

Overall, the Aloha State placed in the middle of the pack, like last year, at 25th out of 50 states in rankings released Tuesday by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The KIDS COUNT Data Book gauges the welfare of kids using 16 measures in the categories of economic well-being, education, health and family/community.

"The good news is that we're no longer slipping in rank where it comes to the overall well-being of Hawaii's children, as had been the case in recent years," said Ivette Rodriguez Stern, Hawaii KIDS COUNT project director.

The state's overall ranking was 26th in 2011, improving to 24th in 2012, then slipping one spot last year.

Hawaii's lowest ranking was for "economic well-being," at 33rd in the nation. Within that domain the indicator most out of line with national norms was the fraction of children living in households with a "high housing cost burden."

"The cost of housing in this state, as we all know, is so astronomical that it hits low-income families in a big-time way," said Victor Geminiani, executive director of the Hawaii Appleseed Center for Law and Economic Justice. "We have not in this state focused on what we do for the vast majority of people that are struggling. We haven't put energy or concern or creativity into creating low-income rentals the way we have upon homeownership."

Hawaii's children fared well in two health measures.

Only 3 percent lacked health insurance, compared with 7 percent nationally, giving the Aloha State the second-best ranking in the nation on that indicator. It also had the seventh-lowest death rate among children and teens in the country.

But teens in Hawaii were more likely to abuse alcohol or drugs, at 8 percent, compared with 6 percent nationally.

"Our strengths in the health and family and community areas mask in some ways our poorer performance in education and economic well-being," said Norm Baker, chief operating officer of Aloha United Way, which supports more than 300 nonprofit agencies and programs.

"When you look at education and economic well-being, we at AUW see that as a cause-and-effect relationship," he said. "If people succeed in their education, then in the long run they are going to be

economically self-sufficient. If people fail at education, then they are going to wind up having poor economic outcomes."

Baker said AUW is focusing on education and poverty prevention. Its programs help shelter the homeless and keep folks from slipping over the edge and onto the street.

They also try to give kids a good start. He welcomed more funds channeled toward preschool in the last legislative session and recent advances in academic performance at public schools.

"It's going to take political will to sustain that improvement over the long run," he said.

KIDS COUNT found that about half of Hawaii's preschool-age keiki attend preschool, a slightly better rate than nationally. Getting children ready for success in kindergarten is vital, Baker said, and AUW partner agencies are contributing to that effort.

"We are working to build a sustainable developmental screening program that covers hearing, vision, social, emotional problems," Baker said. "About 62 percent of kids in Hawaii are not screened" before reaching kindergarten.

Hawaii has improved in the education domain in recent years, in reading and math performance as well as the number of high school students graduating on time, at 78 percent, the KIDS COUNT reports show.

Academic proficiency among island children is now close to the national averages, although both rates remain low. In Hawaii 68 percent of eighth-graders were not proficient in math, compared with 66 percent nationally. Seventy percent of fourth-graders in Hawaii were not proficient in reading, compared with 66 percent nationally, KIDS COUNT reported.

Covering the basic necessities at home remains challenging. KIDS COUNT reported that 17 percent of Hawaii's children live below the federal poverty line, which is \$23,283 in annual income for a family of four. Nationally the figure was 23 percent of kids living in poverty.

But that cash-income comparison misses the day-to-day reality for Hawaii's families, who must grapple with some of the highest housing, electricity and food prices in the nation. To make ends meet, many people in Hawaii hold down more than one job or share homes with multiple wage earners.

"We use the federal poverty level in KIDS COUNT because we can use it to compare across the states, but we know that it is an understatement in Hawaii because of our high cost of living," Stern said.

Geminiani of the Hawaii Appleseed Center said the Supplemental Poverty Measure of the Census Bureau takes into account the cost of living and income such as welfare and tax credits. That measure puts Hawaii's poverty rate for residents of all ages well above the national average, he said.

Hawaii had its highest ranking in the family-and-community domain on the KIDS COUNT report. It was nearly twice as likely to have a head of household with at least a basic education. Just 8 percent of households in Hawaii were headed by a person who lacked a high school diploma, as compared with 15 percent nationally.

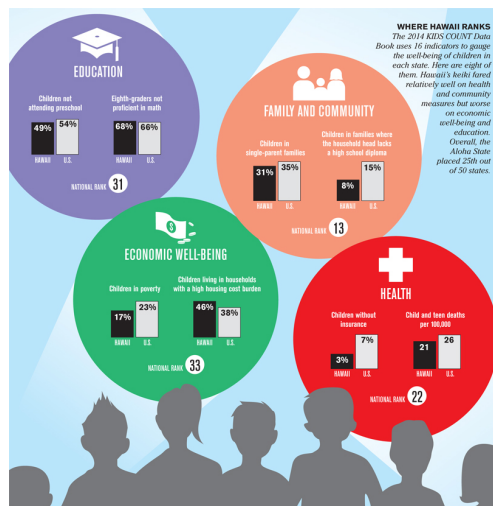
It also was less likely to have children in single-parent families, at 31 percent, compared with 35 percent nationally.

Across the country, Massachusetts, Vermont and Iowa ranked highest for overall child well-being, while Mississippi, New Mexico and Nevada ranked lowest.

"All of us, in every sector — business, government, nonprofits, faith-based groups, families — need to

continue to work together to ensure that all children have the chance to succeed," said Patrick McCarthy, president and CEO of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. "We simply cannot afford to endanger the futures of the millions of low-income children who don't have the chance to experience high-quality childhood programs and the thriving neighborhoods that higher-income families take for granted."

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charity based in Baltimore that conducts research and provides grants focused on giving children better futures. This is the 25th edition of its KIDS COUNT Data Book, which uses data from the National Vital Statistics System, the American Community Survey and other government sources to track the well-being of children over time and across states.



On the Net:

For the full report, visit www.aecf.org/resources/the-2014-kids-count-data-book.

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