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D.C. KIDS COUNT: Children Left Behind Despite Economic Gains

(Washington, D.C., February 9, 2012) – Despite overall economic gains over the past ten years, too many children have been left behind. Median family income is up 12 percent, but the city’s child poverty rate has barely changed. In 2010, 30 percent of the city’s children were living in families with income at or below 100 percent of the federal poverty line (\$22,000 for a family of four), compared to 32 percent in 2000.

Where children live in the District of Columbia has a large effect on how they live, including their health and educational success, according to data released today by DC Action for Children. [Ward-level data snapshots](#) reveal significant place-based disparities in child and family well-being, as well as rapid changes in circumstances for the city’s children and families over the last decade.

“The snapshots tell us an incredible story about the importance of place in children’s lives,” said HyeSook Chung, executive director of DC Action for Children. “Poverty in D.C. continues to be as big a threat to our youngest children today as polio was to a previous generation, and it is at epidemic rates in Wards 1, 5, 6, 7 and 8 – where more than one-quarter and up to one-half of children are living in families with income below 100 percent of the federal poverty line.”

While many city-wide indicators show gains in child health and well-being, overall numbers do not tell the complete story. The snapshots reveal the importance of where they live as a critical factor in the lives of the city’s children and families:

- Despite a small city-wide decline, child poverty is up in Wards 7 (from 37 to 40 percent) and Ward 8 (from 47 to 48 percent) and unchanged in Ward 5 (28 percent).
- Half of the city’s wards (Wards 2, 3, 4 and 6) experienced increases in the number of children under 5, despite an overall lack of growth in the city’s under 5 population in the last decade.

- Birth rates were up in nearly every ward, with Ward 4 experiencing the most significant growth – from 66.6 births per 1,000 women (ages 15-44) to 96.6 births. Only Ward 2 had a decrease in birth rates over the decade.
- Despite an overall decrease in infant mortality in the city (from 11.9 per 1,000 live births in 2000 to 10.9 in 2008), rates are up in five of the city's wards – Wards 2, 4, 5, 7 and 8.

“Children grow up in neighborhoods, and many neighborhood factors contribute to how well children are prepared to learn and become successful adults,” said Jon Fernandez, Chair of DC Action for Children’s Board of Directors. “The best public policies must address the whole child from cradle to career, and these data should help guide such policies.”

DC Action for Children recommends five key strategies to help city leaders build on the strengths and address the challenges identified in these snapshots:

- **Begin planning now for a new cohort of middle school students in 10 years.** The beginnings of growth in the under 5 population, combined with increasing birth rates in almost every ward, give city leaders a generous time horizon for making significant improvements to the city’s secondary schools to ensure they are high quality for students in all neighborhoods.
- **Improve calibration between change in poverty and change in public benefits.** The lack of close tracking between changes in poverty and change in public benefits (poverty was up in Ward 8 but TANF receipt was down, for example) indicates that eligibility is not as finely tuned as it needs to be to changes in poverty and need.
- **Focus on neighborhood-level and place-based solutions to neighborhood-level and place-based problems.** The significant differences in child and family well-being among the city’s wards demonstrate a need for ward- and neighborhood-focused solutions that improve community conditions so that all children can thrive.
- **Invest in programs to improve the health of women of child-bearing age to increase positive birth outcomes.** The number of infant deaths and percent of births with low birthweight (a key factor in child morbidity and mortality) are still too high in the city. Thoughtful, place-based investments in perinatal health could help alleviate the burden that these health problems place on D.C.’s children, families and communities.
- **Continue to focus attention on the needs of children in city policy discussions.** The needs of low-income families and their children are significant enough to warrant continued attention in city budget negotiations.

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DC Action for Children (www.dckids.org) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to ensuring that all children in the District of Columbia have the opportunity to reach their full potential. This work was made possible through the generous support of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.