Action for Children North Carolina, formerly the North Carolina Child Advocacy Institute (NCCAI), is a non-partisan, non-profit policy and research organization that works to advocate for child well-being by educating and engaging all people across the state to ensure that our children are healthy, safe, well-educated and have every opportunity for success.

The North Carolina Children’s Index, published every other year, provides the latest and most accurate state- and county-level data available on key indicators of child well-being. The Index is an important tool for planning and action by community leaders, policymakers, advocates and others working toward changes that will improve the quality of life for all children.

The 2006 North Carolina Children’s Index examines the status of children in North Carolina. The Index provides county-level data for a selection of indicators used in the overall report in order to emphasize the significance of the surrounding physical, social and economic environment in shaping outcomes for children. County-by-county profiles with the data included in this publication will be available in May 2006 for all 100 counties at www.ncchild.org.

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To obtain additional copies of this publication email admin@ncchild.org. Copies are available free-of-charge; however, shipping costs for multiple copies must be covered by the individual/organization requesting copies.

Stay Informed
Action for Children’s website (www.ncchild.org) provides a wealth of information about children and youth in North Carolina. Research and policy briefs as well as data and statistics are available covering four issue areas: Child Health and Safety, Early Care and Education, Child Maltreatment and Juvenile Justice. There are resources for people interested in speaking out for children, locating local child advocacy organizations or finding “promising practices” for tackling challenges faced by children and youth. Visitors may also sign up for updates through InfoNet, Action for Children’s weekly news service which provides articles of interest and relevance from around North Carolina.

Visit our website at www.ncchild.org.

Support Our Work
If this report, or other information from Action for Children, has been useful to you, please consider making a tax-deductible donation to help Action for Children continue and expand this work. Visit www.ncchild.org to find out how you can support Action for Children’s efforts on behalf of the children of North Carolina.
Executive Summary

Every child in North Carolina deserves a good start in life: a supportive, loving family; a childhood free from the hardships of poverty; a healthy and safe childhood; a sound, basic education; and a future brimming with hope. The 2006 North Carolina Children's Index includes more than 75 indicators of child and youth well-being, which, together, provide an overview of the experiences of children and youth in North Carolina. These data highlight both the areas in which our state is excelling at providing a good beginning, such as immunizations, as well as areas in which North Carolina is not doing well, such as school suspensions.

One-in-Nine Children Lacks Health Insurance

While North Carolina has made great strides in providing health insurance to children, 1-in-9 children still lacks health insurance. This insurance is critical to ensuring that children have a healthy start to life. Children with health insurance make better use of preventive care, have fewer and shorter hospital stays and miss fewer days of school due to illness. N.C. Health Choice, our state's child health insurance program (CHIP), has been successful at providing health insurance to many children of low-income, working families.

North Carolina must acknowledge and address the obstacles to children achieving the kind of start in life that is needed to succeed.

What Can We Do?

North Carolina must continue efforts to increase the number of children with health insurance. Strategies could include improving outreach for N.C. Health Choice and Medicaid or promoting affordable insurance for all families.

Hundreds of Thousands of Families Struggle to Make Ends Meet

North Carolina families have been hit hard by the recession, slow economic recovery and the outsourcing of thousands of manufacturing jobs. More than half-a-million children have working parents who struggle to adequately provide for their families. Since 2001, family income has decreased and the percentage of children in poverty has increased. Growing up in poverty is associated with having impaired health and development as well as lower cognitive development and educational attainment.

What Can We Do?

North Carolina can help struggling families and children by fully funding child care subsidies, ensuring all children have health insurance and increasing the minimum wage.
37,000 Children on Waiting List for Child Care Subsidies

Thousands of children and their families languish on the child care subsidy list, waiting for funds to become available. These subsidies help low-income, working families afford safe, reliable child care. Early care is critical to children’s development, and high quality child care has been shown to increase cognitive, language and social skills. In 2005, the program served a monthly average of 96,000 children under the age of 12; however, more than 37,000 eligible children were not served due to a lack of funds.

What Can We Do? Funding for the child care subsidies program does not come close to meeting the need. Yet this is the very type of program that encourages work by parents and increases the chance that children have access to the kind of early care and education that encourages them to thrive and allows parents to feel confident in the care of their children.

Students in High School Face Many Challenges

Thirty-eight percent of high school students do not make it to graduation; even more distressing, in some school districts the majority of students do not graduate. North Carolina’s high rate of suspensions likely significantly impacts the low high school completion rate. During the 2003-2004 school year, almost 135,000 short-term and 2,500 long-term suspensions were given to high school students. National studies reveal that students who are suspended from school are three times more likely to drop out than other students. Adults who have not completed high school have decreased earnings, have fewer job opportunities and are more likely to be incarcerated, all of which significantly impact North Carolina’s economy. These disturbing statistics have dire long-term consequences for both our youth and our state.

What Can We Do? Graduation rates are influenced by children’s educational experiences from the early years through high school. School readiness and quality early care and education have been shown to boost high school completion rates, yet more than 37,000 children do not receive the child care subsidies they are eligible for because of inadequate funding. Additionally, 1-out-of-every-10 North Carolina students is suspended, a rate 45 percent higher than the national average. Funding for increases in teacher pay, the disadvantaged student supplemental fund and the low-wealth supplemental fund would move North Carolina closer to the Leandro guarantee of a sound, basic education for all students. Progress must be made to decrease the number of dropouts, improve educational outcomes and ensure North Carolina’s workforce readiness in the long-term.
Executive Summary (continued)

North Carolina’s Foster Care System is Improving

Between 2001 and 2005, North Carolina moved from failing to meet national standards to exceeding them on four of six measures of foster care outcomes, such as placement permanency and no recurrence of maltreatment. The Department of Social Services (DSS) and the federal government created an improvement plan to reach the national targets. Monetary support from the state legislature, which allowed DSS to employ the additional staff needed to meet many of their goals and increased foster care and adoption assistance payments, was critical to the success of their plan. Improvements in child outcomes are due to the hard work and dedication of the many people that work within DSS, at both the state and local levels, and to the support of the legislature to fund needed additional staff.

Troubled Youth Entering the Juvenile Justice System

The number of youth reported for committing crimes each year has stayed relatively level since 2000, while the number being committed to treatment in a Youth Development Center (YDC) has been cut in half. The Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (DJJDP) has encouraged enhanced programs to serve youth at the community level, leaving YDC placements for youth who commit the most serious offenses. Assessments show that youth in YDCs have many problems, such as substance abuse, mental health needs and special educational needs.

What Can We Do? To provide more individualized care as well as safer, more secure facilities, DJJDP recently began building a smaller facility pilot and is planning additional smaller YDCs. Funding must be continued for a focus on rehabilitation and success.

North Carolina Youth Have Many Strengths

Despite facing many challenges, North Carolina’s children and youth have many strengths, according to new data. Most teenagers in North Carolina report being active members of the communities in which they live. Meanwhile, most parents are working hard to ensure their children grow up in homes that encourage good habits and behaviors such as reading, doing homework and community engagement. These positive areas of development provide strengths that can be built upon to make North Carolina the best place in which to be and raise a child.

Lack of Funding is Shortchanging the Next Generation

In recent years, federal, state and local budgets have been stretched thin, which has led to cuts in various services aimed at improving the lives of children. Funding for programs has not kept pace with the cost or need. This affects the ability of the N.C. Departments of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency...
Prevention, Social Services and Public Instruction to provide much-needed services and programs for youth. These Departments have not had sufficient funds to consistently maintain and expand services. For example, the Department of Public Instruction suffered large staff cuts at the same time the reporting and testing requirements increased. The Division of Child Development is tasked with providing child care subsidies to all eligible children, but is funded at a level that it must place children on a waiting list. If public expenditures continue to squeeze children, the state will face not only the costs today, but also the long-term consequences, such as an underprepared workforce.

**Policies Can Make a Difference**

North Carolina must develop sound policies to tackle the challenges of ensuring the well-being of our children and youth. Public policies determine not only the resources available, but also the strength and effectiveness of programs that promote child and family well-being. For example, since the policy decision to implement N.C. Health Choice the number of children with health insurance has increased. State policies and budgets affect all types of child and youth outcomes, including access to health insurance and quality child care, suspension and dropout rates, foster care placements and juvenile crime.

North Carolina must acknowledge and address the obstacles to children achieving the kind of start in life that they need to succeed. Comprehensive strategies, creative approaches, adequate funding and public/private partnerships can help North Carolinians guarantee that all children grow up healthy, receive a sound, basic education and develop the strong family and community connections that help children and young adults thrive.
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