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2008 *KIDS COUNT* Data Book Highlights Need for Juvenile Justice Reform Urges Rethinking of State and Local Policy on Youth Offenders

The 2008 *KIDS COUNT Data Book* published today by the Annie E. Casey Foundation highlights the need to re-examine the nation's approach to juvenile justice, and recommends state and local policy changes that would better meet the developmental needs of adolescents and the public safety needs of their communities.

KIDS COUNT data show that youth in Wisconsin are detained and committed in custody at a rate (132 per 100,000 youth) higher than the national rate. Nearly two-thirds of the Wisconsin youth in custody are there for nonviolent offenses. According to the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families (WCCF), this suggests a need to rethink what we are accomplishing by incarcerating so many nonviolent youth offenders.

“Clearly there is another approach that would better serve Wisconsin’s families, taxpayers and neighborhoods,” said Jill Jacklitz, acting WCCF executive director. “Locking up large numbers of kids for relatively minor offenses is not benefiting anybody.” Jacklitz noted that according to FBI data, Wisconsin ranks number one among the states for rate of juvenile disorderly conduct arrests, and the state’s overall juvenile arrest rate is second highest in the nation.

Especially troubling is the dramatic overrepresentation of youth of color among young people in custody in Wisconsin. Youth of color are five times as likely to be in custody as white youth in Wisconsin; the national ratio is 3 to 1. A recent report by the Governor’s Commission on Reducing Racial Disparities in the Wisconsin Justice System contained several policy recommendations for addressing this disturbing imbalance, including abandoning zero-tolerance behavior policies in schools and returning 17-year-olds to the jurisdiction of juvenile courts.

“There is overwhelming evidence that racial bias is built into the current justice system at nearly every point,” said Jacklitz. “It’s time to confront this problem head-on and restore Wisconsin’s reputation for fairness.”

In addition to returning 17-year-olds to the juvenile system, WCCF advocates implementing a mandatory diversion policy that would require courts to seek alternatives to incarceration for youth who have committed nonviolent offenses.

Overall, Wisconsin ranked 12th among the states—the same as last year—in *KIDS COUNT*’s evaluation of 10 indicators of child well-being. While Wisconsin improved in three key areas

related to teens—teen death rate, teen birth rate and percentage of high school dropouts—the state’s child poverty rate continued to worsen. Since 2000 Wisconsin’s child poverty rate has grown from 12 percent to 15 percent, and we have dropped to 16th in the nation on that measure.

“Wisconsin has long been one of the best places in the country for a kid to grow up, but we can no longer take that status for granted,” said Jacklitz. “There are too many areas, such as child poverty and racial disparities in juvenile justice, in which we’re not doing very well. It’s time to work proactively to reverse these disturbing trends.”

The *KIDS COUNT Data Book* with state-by-state rankings, supplemental data, and the essay, “A Road Map for Juvenile Justice Reform,” can be viewed online at <http://www.kidscount.org/datacenter/databook.jsp>