

JustSouth QUARTERLY



SUMMER 2014



The KIDS COUNT Gulf South

Children in the region continue not to count much! By FRED KAMMER, S.J.

In recent years, scholars and policy-makers have developed alternative measures of “poverty” that look at a range of issues in measuring human well-being beyond the simpler economic “poverty line.” While there are a variety of such measures, the one that gained acceptance internationally is the *Human Development Report* and its Human Development Index adopted by the United Nations Development Program in 1990.¹ The focus is more on “human development” than “poverty,” drawing on the work of economist Mahbub ul Haq at the World Bank in the 1970s.

...Dr. Haq argued that *existing measures of human progress failed to account for the true purpose of development—to improve people’s lives*. In particular, he believed that the commonly used measure of Gross Domestic Product failed to adequately measure well-being.²

The index developed by Dr. Haq and others focuses on three key dimensions—a long and healthy life, access to knowledge, and a decent standard of living. This is a narrower focus than the full-blown human development categories but covers three measurable sets of markers that are considered crucial to human well-being.

The KIDS COUNT Index

One of the most valuable measures used in the U.S. context is the KIDS COUNT Index developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and published annually with data for the country, the states, and smaller political subdivisions.³ Similar to the Human Development Index, the KIDS COUNT Index uses multiple indicators grouped under four headings or “domains”: Economic Well-Being, Education, Health, and Family and Community.

Under each domain, four key indicators are applied to every state to determine a domain score (e.g., health), and then each state is ranked by its domain score. Afterwards, the four domain scores are summed to give an overall score for the state, and then the states are ranked from best to worst scores.

Rank of Gulf South States on Selected KIDS COUNT Indicators [2013]

MEASURE	Alabama	Florida	Louisiana	Mississippi	Texas
Economic Well-Being	40	45	42	50	30
Education	44	35	45	48	31
Health	35	37	41	48	36
Family/Community	44	35	47	50	48
Overall Rank	44	38	46	49	42

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Illustrative Indicators for Each Domain for the U.S. and Gulf South States [2013]⁴

INDICATOR	United States	Alabama	Florida	Louisiana	Mississippi	Texas
ECONOMIC WELL-BEING: Children in poverty	23%	28%	25.6%	29%	35%	26%
EDUCATION: Fourth graders Not proficient in reading	68%	69%	61%	77%	79%	72%
HEALTH: Low-birthweight babies	8.1%	10%	8.6%	10.8%	11.6%	8.3%
FAMILY AND COMMUNITY: Children in single-parent families	35%	39%	40%	48%	49%	36%

Since mere rankings can hardly give a sense of the serious social and economic factors confronting children in the Gulf South, I have chosen a single KIDS COUNT indicator under each domain to illustrate particularly dire conditions faced by Gulf South children:

For economic well-being: *Children in Poverty*—the percentage of children under age 18 living in families with incomes under 100 percent of the U.S. poverty threshold determined each year by the Census Bureau.

For education: *Fourth-graders not proficient in reading*—the percentage of fourth-grade public school students who did not reach the proficient level of reading as measured by the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP).

For health: *Low-birthweight babies*—the percentage of live births weighing less than 2,500 grams (5.5 pounds).

For family and community: *Children in single-parent families*—the percentage of children under age 18 who live with their own unmarried parent either in a family or subfamily. In this definition, single-parent families may include cohabiting couples. Children living with married stepparents are not included.

The table above reflects these four adverse indicators for children in the United States and the Gulf South states, as taken from the 2013 KIDS COUNT index.

Even these figures fail to capture the reality that Gulf South children of color, especially African-American and Hispanic children, fare far worse in the KIDS COUNT calculations than do non-Hispanic whites. For example, the percentage of African-American children in poverty is 46 percent in Alabama, 40 percent in Florida, 46 percent in Louisiana, 52 percent in

Mississippi, and 34 percent in Texas. The percentage of Hispanic children in poverty is 45 percent in Alabama, 31 percent in Florida, 29 percent in Louisiana, and 35 percent in Texas (a statistically reliable Mississippi percentage is unavailable). In contrast, the percentage of non-Hispanic white children in poverty is 16 percent in Alabama, 15 percent in Florida and Louisiana, 19 percent in Mississippi, and 11 percent in Texas.

The Moral Challenge

In 1990, St. John Paul II wrote to the secretary of the United Nations, “Indeed, in the Christian view, our treatment of children becomes the measure of our fidelity to the Lord himself.”⁵ Because of their vulnerability, children are entitled to nurturance and protection, not just from their families but from society itself. Protecting them, educating them, providing necessary health care, and assuring economic security for their families is an intrinsic part of the responsibility of governments at all levels for the common good of society and right relationships among various societal groups.

When at least one of every four children in the Gulf South lives in poverty and one-half to one-third of children of color do so, society has failed abysmally in its duties to the “least among us.” Moreover, the above statistics on the economic security, education, health status, and family well-being of our Gulf South children seem to promise little by way of assurance that the future of our region will be one of equality of opportunity. Nor do these statistics provide much promise that future generations of children will be liberated from the neglect and unjust social systems in which we seem so mired.

Legislatures in the Gulf South continue these destructive patterns for Gulf South children year after year as they make decisions that underfund public education, continue punitive welfare restrictions, refuse expanded Medicaid coverage for the working poor, tax poor families, and pretend that the current minimum wage provides full-time workers with any hope of moving beyond subsistence living. Their responsibility, however, is shared by those of us who remain silent in the face of gross inequality, poor education, and unequal access to health care or who pay our own employees subsistence wages with minimal benefits.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The Human Development Index and its application to the Gulf South states was discussed in “The Measure of Poverty,” *JustSouth Quarterly*, Spring 2010, pp. 8-10 by Fred Kammer, SJ, at www.loyno.edu/jsri/sites/loyno.edu.jsri/files/MeasureofPoverty-Spring2010jsq.pdf
- ² The American Human Development Project of the Social Science Research Council, *The Measure of America: American Human Development Report 2008-2009*, p. 10. Cf. www.measureofamerica.org (accessed 1/29/10).
- ³ The KIDS COUNT Data Book for 2013 can be accessed at datacenter.kidscount.org/publications/databook/2013
- ⁴ While the data is taken from the 2013 KIDS COUNT reports, the data actually may be from years 2011-2013, depending on the statistical sources and the indicators (accessed May 22, 2014).
- ⁵ Pope St. John Paul II, *Letter to His Excellency Javier Pérez de Cuellar, Secretary General of the United Nations Organization, on the occasion of the World Summit for Children*, Sept. 22, 1990, citing Matthew 18:5.