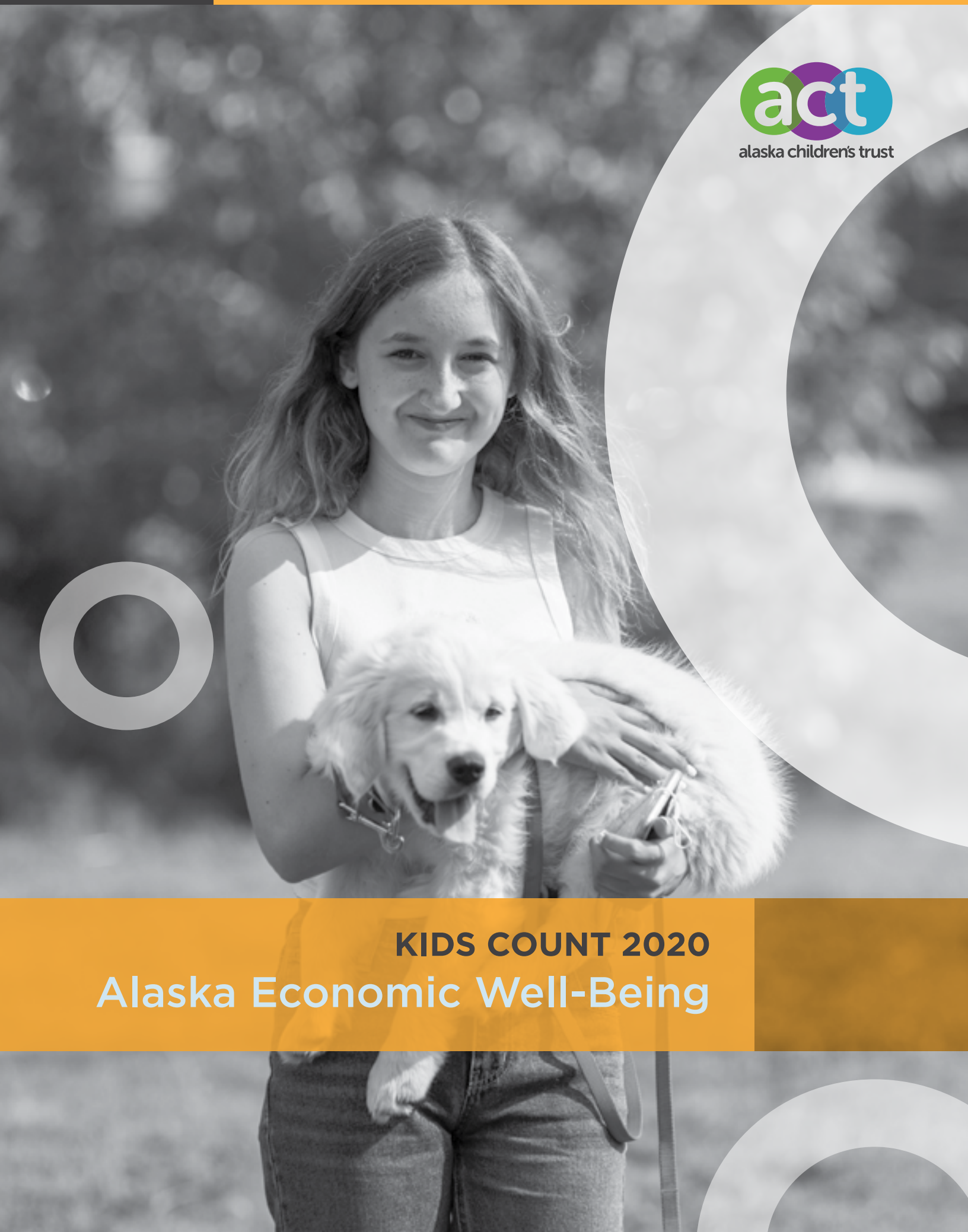


alaska children's trust

KIDS COUNT 2020

Alaska Economic Well-Being

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Solutions

Economic well-being is a cornerstone to ensuring children are healthy, live in safe, stable, and nurturing communities, get a good education, and become strong contributors to our collective success.

Without a strong economic footing, families are at greater risk of experiencing many of the physical, social, and behavioral ills that plague so many of our communities.

It is important for Alaskans to come together to ensure all families have access to the resources necessary to raise thriving children. By addressing the economic circumstances that create barriers limiting families' access to resources that support their children's development, we can improve many of the negative trends shown throughout the KIDS COUNT reports.

To strengthen our collective commitment to ensuring families have the resource to provide for their children, Alaska Children's Trust recommends the following:

1. **Increase Investment in Basic Need Programs**
   Fourteen percent of Alaska children live at or below 100% of the U.S. poverty level. In FY 2020, Alaska's public assistance budget was 21.4 percent lower than the average between FY 2011 and FY 2014. Access to basic needs like food, shelter, and health care is essential to the well-being of Alaska's children and families. Strong public benefit programs provide families the safety net needed to reduce their risk of becoming homeless or having to make choices that put their children at risk. Alaska needs to increase investment programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Unemployment Insurance, Public Assistance, Housing Assistance, and Medicaid.

2. **Single Point of Entry**
   Reduce administrative burdens processing applications and on families who are trying their best to foster their well-being by implementing some form of Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility across all basic need programs. By establishing a single point of entry, families can enter through any program but be screened for eligibility across all programs. Being able to fill out one application reduces administrative costs, and most of all, reduces barriers to families.

3. **Increase Access to High Quality, Affordable Child Care and Pre-K**
   Many parents struggle to find a child care program they can afford that meets their needs and are left with impossible trade-offs to cover the cost of child care in their monthly budget. Parents – disproportionately mothers - are often forced to make career sacrifices, including leaving a job, which not only has an immediate financial impact but also significant long-term costs. If parents can't afford child care, they can't go to work. If they can't go to work, they cannot pay rent. While Alaska already has a Child Care Assistance Program, we need to work to ensure that no family co-pay is more than 7 percent of their household income for child care. Removing administrative barriers and the Parents Achieving Self-Sufficiency (PASS) tier system will help the caseload numbers reflect the number of Alaskan children needing quality, affordable child care.

4. **Fair Hiring Practices for Formerly Incarcerated**
   For the estimated 18,000 Alaskan children who have at least one parent who was formerly incarcerated, it is a detriment to their success if their parent is unable to find a quality high-wage job. Even when a parent has served their time, finding a job after serving their sentence can be an insurmountable challenge. Alaska needs to pass "Ban the Box" legislation to prohibit employers from asking about criminal convictions until the final steps of a job application process and create incentives and supports for employers who hire former prisoners.

5. **Strengthen Housing Policies**
   Everyone needs housing they can afford. Communities should focus on ensuring they provide a full range of housing options, including an adequate supply of housing at all price points, and policymakers can support those efforts through implementing "Good Cause" eviction policies, property tax incentives for affordable housing, and providing a suite of options for local governments to adopt to facilitate safe, stable housing plans for communities across Alaska.

6. **Establish Paid Family and Sick Leave**
   People should not be forced to choose between their economic security and their health, or the health of a loved one. Without paid family and sick leave, workers may not be able to stay home from work when they are sick or someone in their family needs care. Alaska should pass legislation to establish paid family and sick leave for all Alaskans.

7. **Minimum Wage Increase**
   Alaska needs a minimum wage that better aligns with actual living expenses. As more low-wage jobs fill the Alaska market, it is more important than ever to ensure Alaskans receive a pay that allows them to meet their basic needs. Alaska needs to establish a method for the state's minimum wage to be automatically adjusted for cost of living.

8. **Explore New Revenue Sources**
   Alaska Children's Trust remains committed to investing in our most precious resource - children. To achieve this goal, ACT strongly supports the diversification of revenue streams in our state budget. Conservative investing suggests the state pursuing a wide range of alternate revenue streams to create stability, longevity, and avoid continuing cuts to the services that support Alaska's families and children. Over the last five years, reductions in funding continue to weaken the resilience of our communities and harm our children. To mitigate the harm caused by cuts to services, we encourage the state to invest in new sources of revenue. We need to avoid regressive taxes that unfairly burden families or sales taxes which disproportionately affect households with children. Continue issuing the Permanent Fund Dividend while continuing to ensure the health of the corpus of the fund.

What Would it Take to Lead the Pacific Northwest?

Washington, Oregon, and Idaho are Alaska's three closest American neighbors geographically. They rank 19th, 29th, and 17th respectively in the KIDS COUNT Economic Well-Being while Alaska ranks 34th.

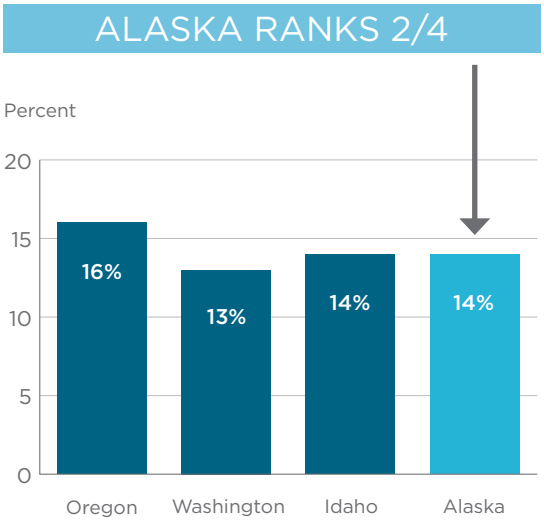
What would need to change for Alaska to lead the Pacific Northwest?

The KIDS COUNT data for Alaska's geographic peers shows that Alaska is competitive with the peers around the percentage of children living in poverty and percentage of children living in households with high housing cost burdens. However, Alaska lags the peer group in the percentage of children whose parents lack secure employment and in the percentage of teens not in school and not working.

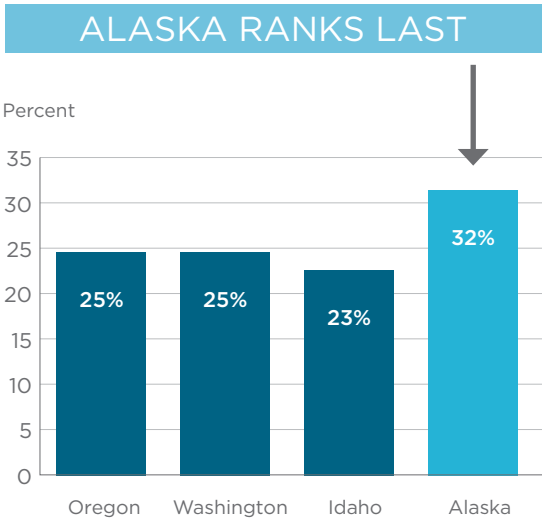
In order to lead the Pacific Northwest, Alaska would need to reduce the percentage (and number) of:

- Children whose parents lack secure employment by roughly one-quarter from 32 percent to a number below 25 percent;
- Teens not in school and not working by 30 to 40 percent from 10 percent to 6 to 7 percent. This goal could be accomplished by keeping more teens in school and with greater support in helping them transition to the job market.

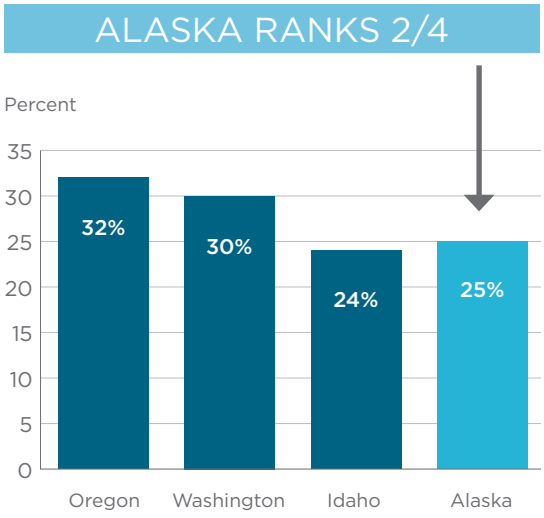
If Alaska did these two things while maintaining or improving relative competitiveness around the percentage of children in poverty and high housing costs then Alaska could not just lead the Pacific Northwest but come close to being in the top quartile in children's economic well-being.



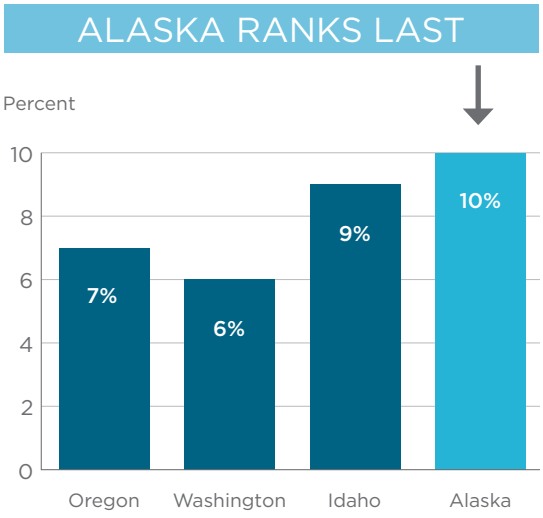
Children in Poverty



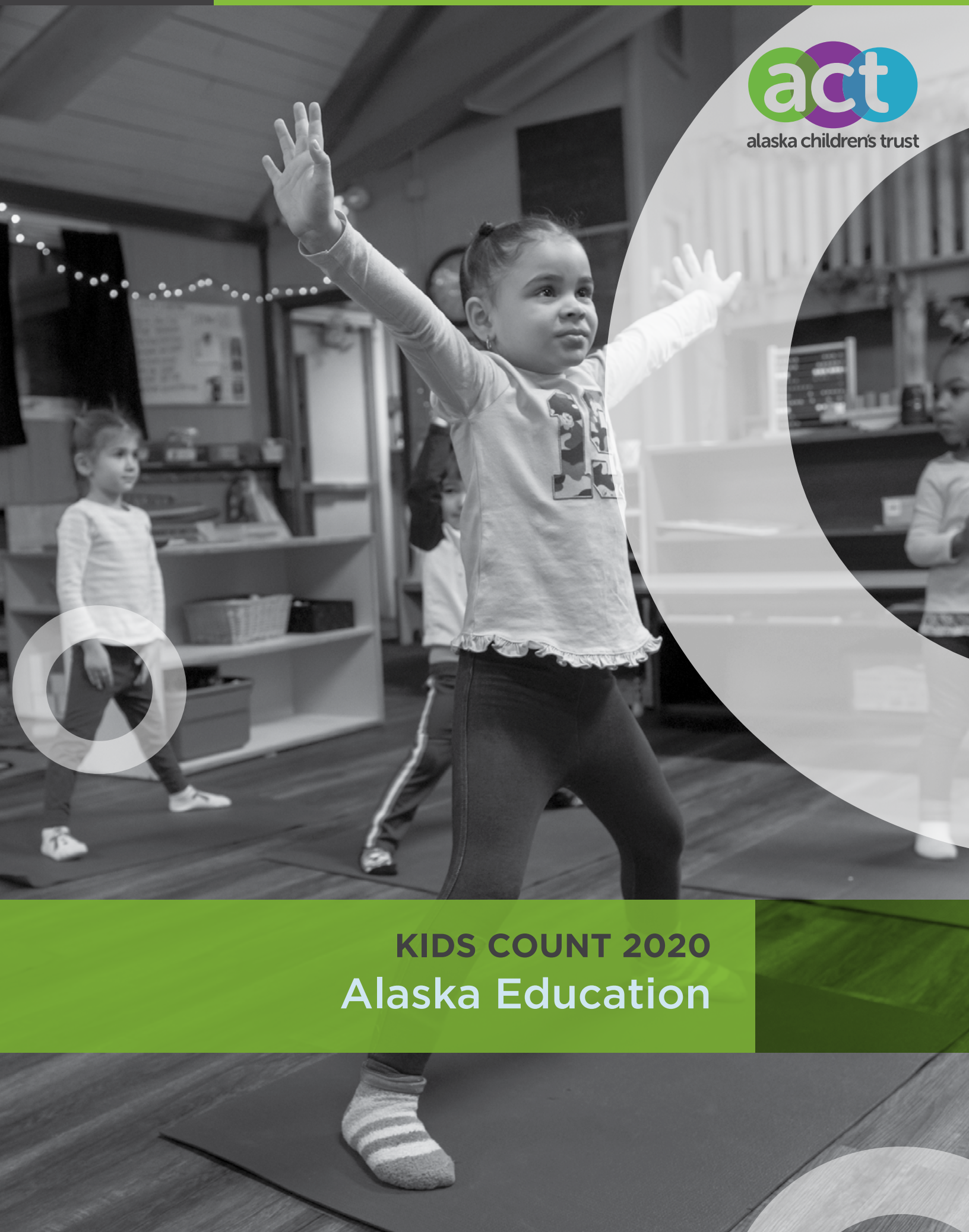
Children Whose Parents Lack Secure Employment



Children Living in Households With a High Housing Cost Burden



Teens Not in School and Not Working



alaska children's trust

KIDS COUNT 2020
Alaska Education

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Solutions

Education is an upstream tool that helps set children on a path to become strong contributors to our collective success. One of the largest areas of investment made by the state of Alaska is in education. However, when the state makes that investment in the development stream greatly affects the return on that investment. The more we invest at the headwaters of the stream, the greater return on investment. In Alaska, we like to say, go so far upstream, we stop the glacier from melting.

Alaska needs to do a better job of aligning its investment with the data and science. A tiny portion of Alaska's education investment is made early in the birth to graduation stream.

Alaska's overall investment decreased over the past several years. These factors show in our overall performance. Since 2014, Alaska has been ranked in the bottom 10 states for Education. For the past two years, we have been ranked 49th.

Alaska has made some positive gains in our efforts to ensure children receive the best education possible. But we are losing ground and are at a pivotal junction for many of the issues being tracked. To strengthen our collective commitment to the education of children, Alaska Children's Trust recommends the following:

1. **Expand Early Childhood Education**
   A child's early years hold a key to their success. It is a time of astonishing growth and development. It prevents the achievement gap, improves health outcomes, boosts earnings, and provides the highest rate of economic return in this area. Early childhood (birth through age five) education significantly impacts the rest of a child's education. Alaska needs to increase its investment from less than 1 percent to a minimum of 25 percent and begin to work towards universal Pre-K.

2. **Boost Developmental Screenings**
   Going upstream increases one's potential for success and lessens the economic burden on our systems. This approach also holds true for Developmental Screenings. The sooner an issue is identified, the sooner it can be addressed, lessening the negative impacts on the child, community and overall system. Alaska should establish a taskforce to find ways to achieve a minimum screening rate of 90 percent, no matter where a child lives.

3. **Strengthen Reading Proficiency**
   Reading proficiency is highly correlated with future success in not just school but life after school. To strengthen this core area, Alaska is encouraged to utilize the 2008 report, "Developing Early Literacy" released by the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP). Its findings point to five promising interventions to develop and strengthen early literacy skills. One of the first steps is increasing our investment in expanding early childhood education.

4. **Build Healthy School Cultures**
   A students' educational success is not solely dependent on the curriculum used or by the skill of the teachers. The overall environment of the school plays a significant role. When students feel connected and see their school recognize them and their culture, a student's attendance and overall performance increases. Schools are encouraged to find and utilize a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion lens and assess their school's inclusivity and equitability. An example is tribal compacting of education. Alaska should continue exploring and finding a path to tribal compacting.

5. **Increase Social Emotional Supports**
   As outlined in the KIDS COUNT Health report, two key solutions outlined were increasing school based mental health services and include social emotional screening to standard universal screenings conducted for physical health.

6. **Further Grow Graduation Rates**
   The success Alaska has experienced increasing our graduation rate over the past decade is something to celebrate. But our work is not done. To continue along this positive trajectory, we need to implement the ideas outlined above. If our reading and math proficiency continue to decrease, and our overall investment in education decreases and focuses only on K-12, we will begin to see graduation rates begin to fall.

7. **Stop Defunding**
   For the past decade, Alaska has reduced our real dollar investment in education based on the assumption that our investment was too high and the return on investment was too low. As Alaska reduced its funding, our overall educational outcomes continued to decrease. Alaska needs to stop defunding education, better align the funding with proven interventions, and potentially be ready to increase funding to achieve true change. Flat funding, with no adjustment for inflation, is a decrease in funding.

What Would it Take to Lead the Pacific Northwest?

Washington, Oregon, and Idaho are Alaska's three closest American neighbors geographically. They rank 14th, 41st, and 36th respectively in the KIDS COUNT Education while Alaska ranks 49th.

What would need to change for Alaska to lead the Pacific Northwest?

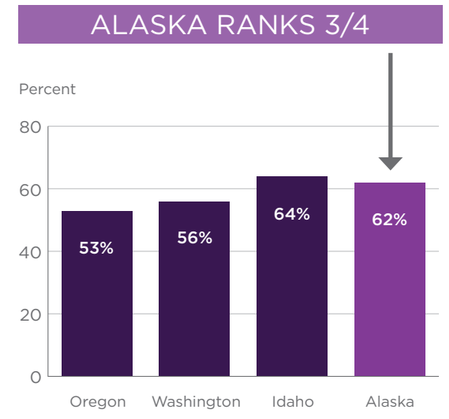
The KIDS COUNT data for Alaska's geographic peers shows that while Alaska lags its peers in all of these indicators, save Idaho with respect to Young Children in School, the challenges Alaska faces are also challenges the other states face.

For example, none of these states have more than 50 percent of young children ages 3 and 4 in school and none are recording more than 40 percent proficiency for reading and math at appropriate grade levels.

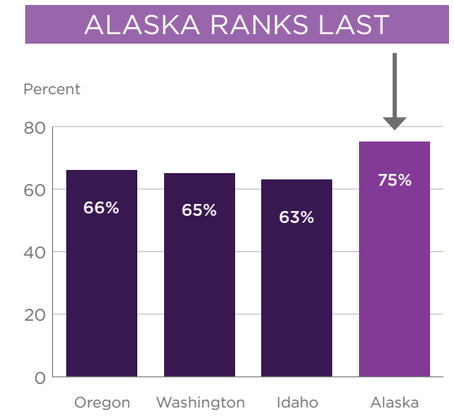
In order to lead the Pacific Northwest Alaska would need to reduce the percentage of:

- young children ages 3 and 4 by one-fifth from 62 percent to something closer to 50 percent;
- not proficient fourth grade readers by nearly one-fifth from 75 percent to closer to 60 percent;
- not proficient eighth grade mathematicians by one-seventh from 71 percent to between 60 and 63 percent;
- high school students not graduating on time by one-half from 43 percent to closer to 15 percent.

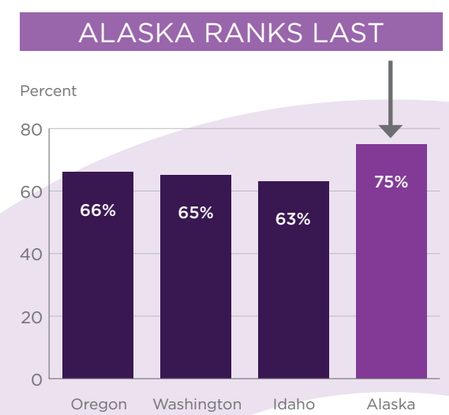
If Alaska did all of these things it would radically shift the well-being of Alaska's children while creating a stronger workforce better prepared for life and less likely to rely on social safety systems or be incarcerated.



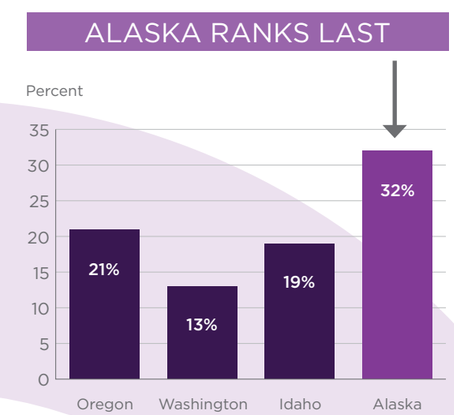
Young Children (Ages 3 & 4) Not in School



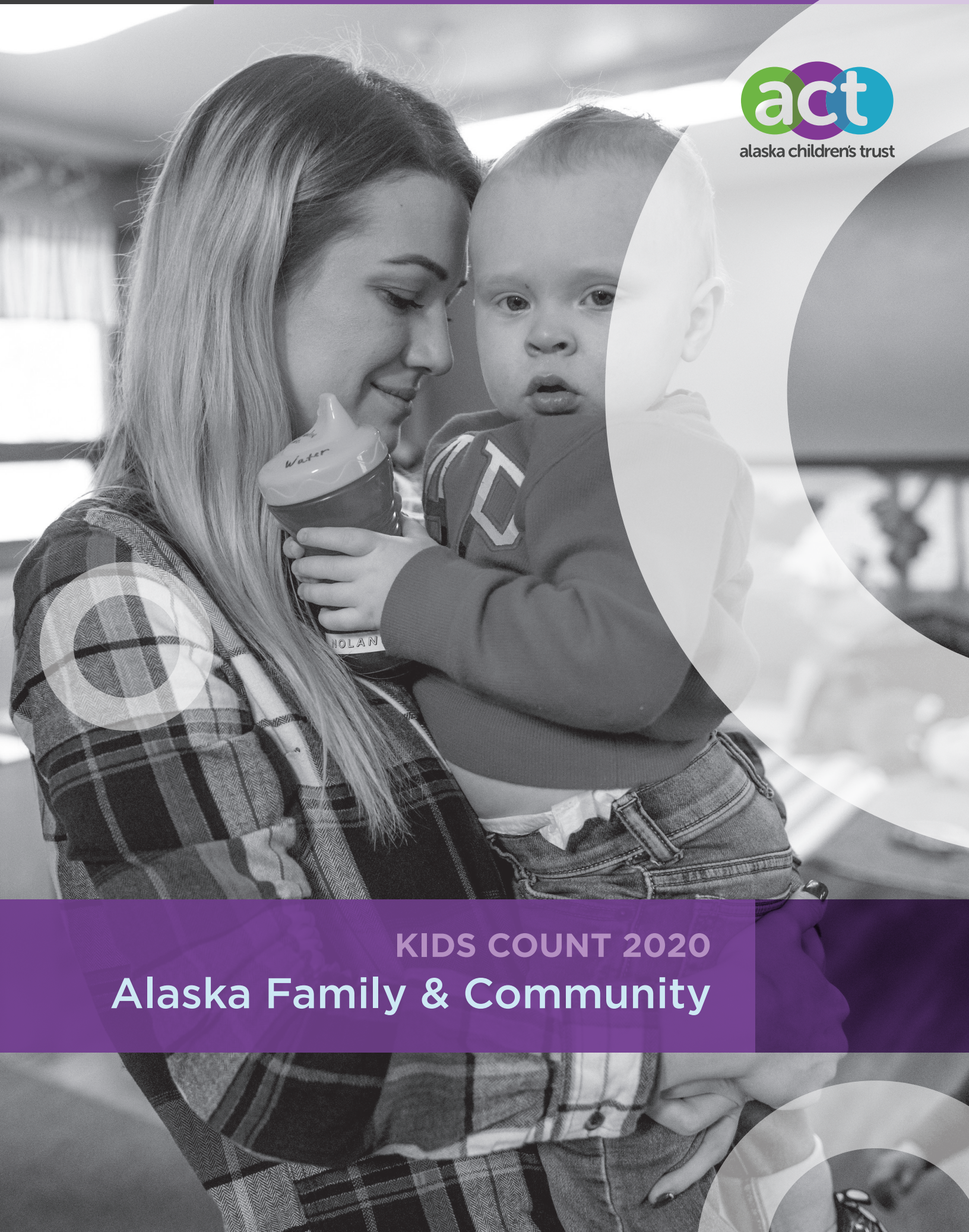
Fourth Graders Not Proficient in Reading



Eighth Graders Not Proficient in Math



High School Students Not Graduating on Time



alaska children's trust

KIDS COUNT 2020

Alaska Family & Community

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Solutions

The policy implications of the Family and Community indicators are difficult to capture in just a few paragraphs. The reality is that issues like poverty, suicide, and child abuse and neglect have no single determining cause and involve many interlocking levels of individual, community, and societal influences.

There is no one policy that will unilaterally cause the outcomes we want in reducing poverty and reversing troubling trends.

To solve complex issues, we need to challenge our assumptions, values, and beliefs. Many times, the decisions leaders make that affect society are not based on facts or data, but their own assumptions, values, and beliefs. At times, their assumptions, values, and beliefs cause them to make decisions that negatively impact the issue that concerns them. For example, many leaders do not support teaching comprehensive human development curricula in schools, although all research and data show how it reduces unplanned pregnancy, abortions, child sexual abuse, and so much more. This opposition is not based in data, but in belief.

In addition to more fact-driven discussions, we also need to acknowledge the existence, and effect of, past mistakes. Alaska's dismantling of services that supported families, like family resource centers, caused families to lose access to the support and resources needed to help them thrive. We need to utilize data to help connect the dots. Imagine if all the key children and family services ran a report of their top 50 users and then those reports were merged to identify the families with the highest need. We could provide wraparound services to help those families become stable and less costly to the system.

Finally, we all need to be open to innovation and change. What we have been doing for the past decade or more is not working. We, as in the state, service providers, and families, need to be open to trying new things, relinquish their hold on resources, and find a way to embrace change.

The Family and Community report hits home the importance of changing investing in upstream services and interventions. Alaska invests a fraction in upstream intervention compared to downstream like corrections, institutions, or child welfare. Ideas for increasing upstream investments to lower downstream costs include:

1. Mental Health Access

Increase access and delivery of mental health care, especially to our rural communities. Behavioral health care services are critical for suicide prevention, addressing trauma, and reducing the adverse effects of mental illness. Ensuring children and families have access to insurance, and that insurance coverage of mental health conditions is on par with physical health conditions,

would be hugely impactful on a variety of issues discussed in KIDS COUNT reports. We need to reduce provider shortages in underserved areas by building our telehealth capacity, require health insurance companies to reimburse for telehealth, and increase broadband access.

2. **Comprehensive Human Development Education**
   The education system needs to be greater than just teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic. Children, as soon as they start school, need to begin learning about their body, both the physical and mental aspects. Students need to understand how their body develops, inside and out, so they can begin to develop the skills to better manage the changes they will experience. They will learn about healthy relationships including comprehensive sexuality education. Empowering children and youth with this information and opening channels of communication within school and in the community will lead to stronger social and emotional competencies that benefit academic performance, reduced risks, and will change these dreadful trends we see in the KIDS COUNT reports.

3. **Data Driven Resource Allocation**
   Unpacking data helps bring an issue into greater clarity. Throughout this report, data is unpacked by region, gender, age, and/or race. By using this data, investments could be more targeted to address "hot spots" or key populations.

4. **Address Racial and Intergenerational Trauma**
   Use community dialogues, culturally competent mental health providers, and adopt a trauma-informed lens in social services to break the cycle of child maltreatment and the revolving door of children in the foster care system. If children and families receive the support they need to work through their trauma, it will have significant impacts on their ability to maintain gainful employment, perform well in school, connect with their community, and overall thrive in life.

5. **Expand Affordable Internet Access**
   To build equity in education and health care, Alaska communities need reliable and affordable access to the internet. Internet is increasingly intertwined with critical functions of life, especially during the COVID pandemic. Communities without reliable, affordable internet see a more significant gap between resources and opportunities available to them than communities with consistent internet access. Policymakers, businesses, and community stakeholders in rural areas need to come together to address broadband barriers in underserved communities.

What Would it Take to Lead the Pacific Northwest?

Washington, Oregon, and Idaho are Alaska's three closest American neighbors geographically. They rank 15th, 21st, and 9th respectively in the KIDS COUNT Family and Community while Alaska ranks 19th. Of the four KIDS COUNT focus areas, Alaska is most competitive with its geographic peers in this area. While this result is welcome there is still room for Alaska to improve and be highly competitive with its peers.

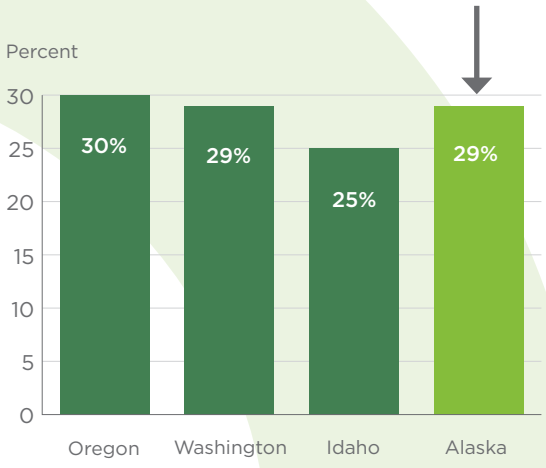
What would need to change for Alaska to lead the Pacific Northwest?

As noted above, the data for Alaska's geographic peers shows that Alaska is competitive in this KIDS COUNT focus area and actually leads its geographic peers in one indicator (Children in Families Where the Household Head Lacks a High School Diploma), but to move to the front of the peer group Alaska would need to:

- Reduce the proportion of children living in high-poverty areas from 7 percent to 4 percent or below which is the peer-standard.
- Further decrease teen births another 33 percent from 19 per 1,000 to less than 13 per 1,000.

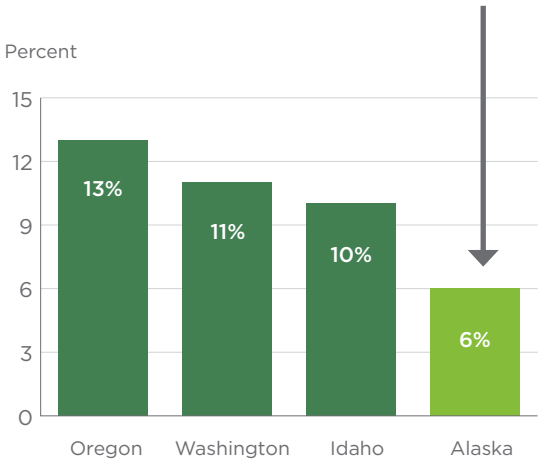
If Alaska achieved these two improvements and maintained its relative position with respect to children in families where the household lacks a high school diploma the state would lead its geographic peer group and be in the top quintile of US states with respect to Family and Community.

ALASKA IS TIED FOR 2/4



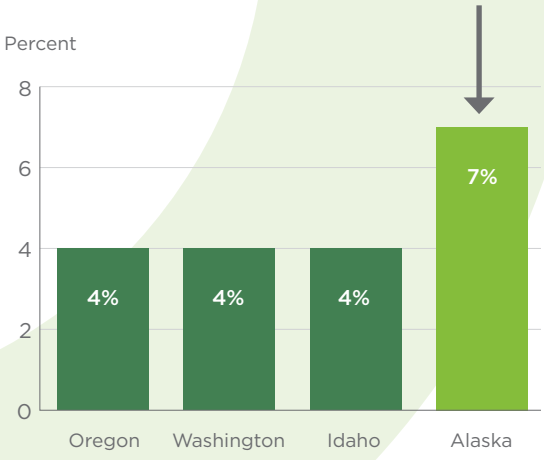
Children in Single-Parent Families

ALASKA RANKS FIRST



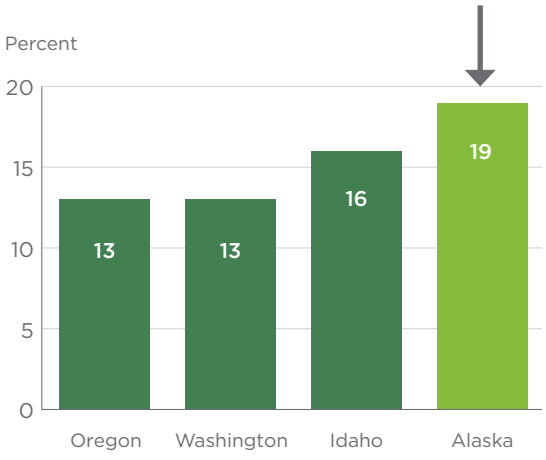
Children in Families Where the Household Head Lacks a High School Diploma

ALASKA RANKS LAST



Children Living in High-Poverty Areas

ALASKA RANKS LAST



Teen Births per 1,000

alaska children's trust

KIDS COUNT 2020
Alaska Health

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Solutions

Children are vital to Alaska's present and its future. The health of children sets the stage for their health as adults. Parents, grandparents, and extended family members are usually committed to ensuring children in their family are healthy and have all the tools possible to fulfill their potential. However, the commitment to the collective health of children varies from state to state. KIDS COUNT ranking makes this difference very evident.

For nearly a decade, Alaska has been ranked in the bottom half, if not the bottom third of all states for child well-being.

Alaska has made some very positive gains in our efforts to ensure children are healthy and thriving. But we are losing ground and are at a pivotal junction for many of the issues being tracked. To strengthen our collective commitment to the health of children, Alaska Children's Trust recommends the following:

1. **Reduce the Rate of Uninsured Children**
   Alaska has the third highest rate of uninsured children. We need to remove barriers and streamline the application process. Suggestions included the ability to make real-time eligibility determinations, address the multitude of health needs, allow presumptive eligibility, and conduct automated renewals and/or permit telephone renewals. Plus, develop a comprehensive outreach plan to identify eligible families.

2. **Expand Eligible Medicaid Expenses**
   a. Long Acting Reversible Contraception (LARC) – permit billing for LARC placements made during delivery.
   b. Telemedicine – continue to allow billing for physical and mental health visits conducted via telemedicine after COVID-19.

3. **Supports for Screened Out Families**
   Over 85 percent of all reports made to the Office of Children's Services are screened out. Research shows, the likelihood of a family being reported again increases after each report. By the third to fifth report, families are finally screened in. With over 75 percent of substantiated cases occurring due to neglect (the failure of a parent or caregiver to provide proper care, including providing adequate shelter, clothing, food, medical care, supervision, and education), imagine if these families were provided supports after the initial report. If the issue that causes the neglect was addressed prior to child protective services having to intervene, Alaska could save hundreds of thousands of dollars annually.

4. **Increase School Based Mental Health Services**
   Mental health counselor's availability at schools has nearly vanished. They play a critical role in ensuring students have the ability to focus and learn.

5. **Social Emotional Screenings**
   Mental health is equally important as physical health, especially during a child's development. It would be highly beneficial to include social emotional screening to standard universal screenings conducted for physical health.

6. **Reduce Vaping**
   Vaping is one of the fastest growing issues facing youth in Alaska. Alaska and Alaska's municipalities should tax vaping products just as they tax tobacco products and they should consider the epidemiological data on usage surrounding banning the sale of flavored vaping products.

7. **Strengthen Data**
   We recommend conducting the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System surveys in middle school to identify emerging risky behaviors and trends while there's still time to influence those behaviors before children become young adults. And the data collection should be opt-out instead of opt-in to provide for a broader and deeper assessment of risky behaviors amongst Alaska's youth.

What Would it Take to Lead the Pacific Northwest?

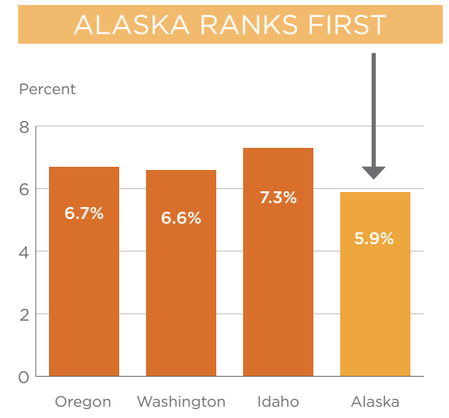
Washington, Oregon, and Idaho are Alaska's three closest American neighbors geographically. They rank 5th, 4th, and 21st respectively in KIDS COUNT Health while Alaska ranks 30th.

What would need to change for Alaska to lead the Pacific Northwest?

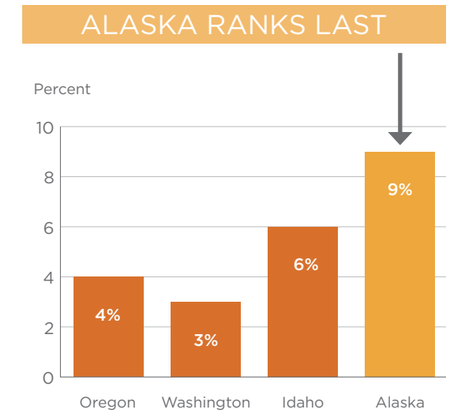
The KIDS COUNT data show that Alaska compares very favorably to these three states when we look at Low Birth Weight Babies and the percent of Children and Teens Age 10 to 17 Who Are Overweight or Obese. In fact, Alaska leads the trio in having the lowest percentage of low birth weight babies.

The difference is in the percentage of children without health insurance: Alaska's rate is triple Washington's, more than double Oregon's, and 50 percent higher than Idaho's rates. In child and teen deaths, Alaska's rate is 72 percent higher than Oregon and Washington and nearly one-third higher than Idaho's.

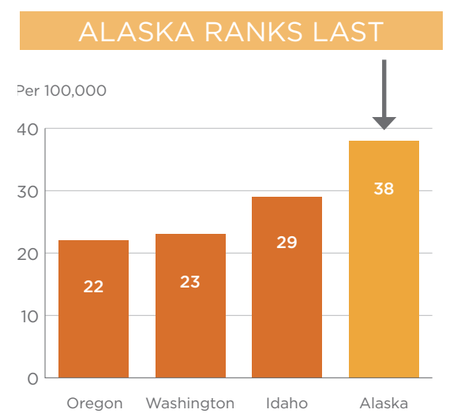
The data suggest that if Alaska wants to lead the Pacific Northwest, we need to substantially cut the percentage of children without health insurance and reduce child and teen deaths. These are achievable goals as are improvements in many of the other health indicators.



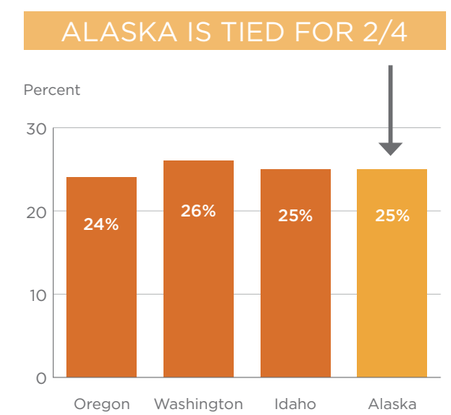
Low Birth-Weight Babies



Children Without Health Insurance



Child and Teen Deaths per 100,000



Children and Teens Ages 10-17 Who Are Overweight or Obese