



### THE KIDS COUNT GRANTEE NETWORK

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Just five years after the 1990 publication of the first KIDS COUNT Data Book, a nationwide KIDS COUNT Network had been established, guided by a member-led revolving steering committee. Funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, this 53-member network is comprised of organizations from every state, as well as the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. At the outset, the KIDS COUNT Network was established as an information sharing and dissemination vehicle to promote the annual [KIDS COUNT Data Book](#), publish local KIDS COUNT data products and populate the [KIDS COUNT Data Center](#) with state and local statistics. Over the past 20 years, the Casey Foundation has invested in the Network's leadership, capacity for advocacy and organizational health, resulting in a network of partners in each state that are helping lawmakers, public agencies, and nonprofits understand the nation's changing demographic profile to encourage more effective programs and policies.



### PROJECT BACKGROUND

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Through the development of public-private partnerships and inter-organizational networks, the KIDS COUNT Network can coordinate the public, private, and nonprofit sectors around shared goals to affect policies related to children. As a premier source of data on children and families, the Network's coordination and reach of ongoing activities supports increased reliability, harmonization and validity of these data.

Although the Network established the KIDS COUNT Data Book to document data products and populate the KIDS COUNT Data Center with state and local statistics, the KIDS COUNT team has had less opportunity to evaluate the Network itself and identify best practices for developing and sustaining partnerships within the Network. In 2016, the University of Colorado Denver's Center on Network Science (CNS) conducted an organizational network analysis to better understand the strengths and gaps in the Network's collective approach to bringing better data on kids in poverty to advocacy and policy conversations.

### THE ORGANIZATIONAL NETWORK ANALYSIS APPROACH

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An organizational network analysis is a unique methodology used to collect data to inform network growth, implementation, and sustainability. Specifically, an organizational network analysis can present the kind of data needed to develop action steps and strategies to strengthen and improve networks.

This report provides the findings of a study conducted between September and November of 2016, utilizing an organizational network analysis methodology to collect data from the Network members on

various aspects of the Network. This study provides a data-informed evidence base about the successes and challenges of the KIDS COUNT Network, and methods for how this initiative might grow and strengthen strategically within an ever-changing landscape.

## METHODS

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In November 2016, an online survey was launched using the PARTNER (Program to Analyze, Record, and Track Networks to Enhance Relationships, [www.partnertool.net](http://www.partnertool.net)) tool. One person from each of 53 KIDS COUNT organizations was identified as a representative to best answer questions about their organization's KIDS COUNT work; the Casey Foundation was also included in the survey as part of the Network. The final response rate was 100%, providing information from all 53 organizations in the Network.

# THE POWER OF THE KIDS COUNT NETWORK

A key principle in successful network building is that more is not always better – meaning that a group of organizations with high quality, trusted relationships that are efficient may function better than a network with many lower quality relationships. In fact, well-rounded, well-functioning networks often include:

- **A diverse range of members** that can bring differing perspectives, resources, and expertise to the collective work;
- A trusted level of **interconnected partnerships** among members as a result of a well-organized (managed) network;
- Members who have a **high commitment and buy-in to the work of the network.**

While the mission, goals and contexts across networks vary significantly, a case study of the KIDS COUNT Network provides insights into the challenges and growth of a national network and the role that diversity, interconnectedness and the factors that facilitate commitment can play in the functioning of a network.

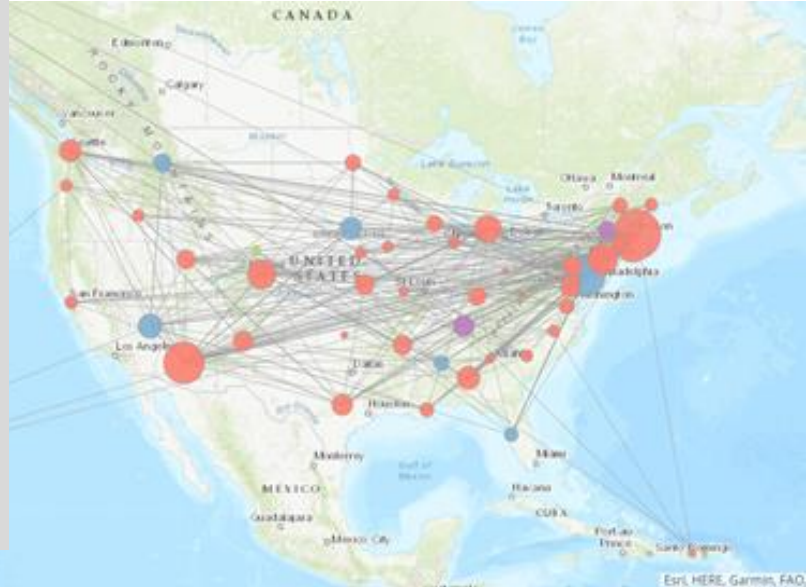
## DIVERSITY

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Each of the 53 network members is unique in its local and state context. At the same time, while there is variation in the local environment in which they navigate, each organization shares a similar mission of working on behalf of children and families. One member described the Network as “a strong coalition of advocates that works well together despite coming from a variety of cultures and political environments.” The value placed on this diversity is evident when asked about network benefits. More than two-thirds of network members stated that collaboration with diverse organizations (77%), peer learning and mentoring (77%), expertise on child and family issues (76%), and feeling valued as a member of the Network (76%) were benefits to being part of the Network.

This map on the following page illustrates how the KIDS COUNT Network is comprised of a **diverse** group of organizations and institutions. Members say they **benefit** from the **variety of perspectives** that each bring to the Network.

“The Network has an AMAZING culture of **support** and selfless **sharing of information, time, and resources**. In the constantly cash-strapped and stressed out world of non-profit advocacy, those relationships and supports **can make ALL the difference** to keep you going.”



### Interconnected Partnerships

Collectively, there were 651 reported interactions (referred to as partnerships) among the 53 organizations, with each Network member averaging 12 partnerships. In looking at where the Network is most successful, common themes revolved around the development and dissemination of data; coordination of efforts; and engaging the media, the public and decision makers. Based on its stated functions, the Network is doing well in its core functions which include:

- Peer support and information sharing,
- Identification and development of common resources, and
- Coordinating with the National KIDS COUNT staff and the Foundation in areas of mutual concern (see KIDS COUNT Network Resource Guide, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017).

### High Commitment and Buy-in

Grantees are very positive about the Network, the role that Casey plays in the Network, and membership in the Network. They overwhelmingly reported being invested and wanting to engage in the Network as much as possible. It is important to note that Casey not only provides annual funding to each of the grantees but invests in resources that facilitate communication, information sharing and learning opportunities for grantees. Grantees describe a strong network that is supportive to the mission of KIDS COUNT, open to discussion and reliable. Their buy-in to the work of the Network is sustained by what they describe as their most important collective achievements:

# FACTORS THAT ENABLE SUCCESS

Together, network members can attain collective achievements because of specific network characteristics that facilitate engagement. In addition to having Casey as a **convening organization** to provide funding, a **steering committee** to implement a governance and input structure, technical assistance and facilitation of the Network, members say that **learning from their peers** in the Network and maintaining a **strong sense of trust and support** among the Network members are important factors that contribute to the Network's success.

## Leadership and Facilitation

Members agreed that the leadership and facilitation provided by Casey is key to meeting their collective goals. 

**93%**

said funding awarded by Casey and having a convening organization enabled the success of the Network.

**98%**


Agree the Network provides them with the appropriate tools, resources and services needed to help their organization effectively achieve its KIDS COUNT goals.

Resources include:

- Organizational capacity building
- Conferences
- Training
- Help with communication strategies
- Peer learning/ Mentoring
- Opportunities for collaboration

*"We have used information and resources provided by other grantees via **KIDS NET**, calls organized by the **Steering Committee workgroups** ... to inform and improve our work"*

## Network Meetings and Making Connections

Members reported that they can engage in the Network to such a successful degree because of the opportunities to meet, share resources and "develop meaningful and ongoing relationships across organizations, regions and states." 

**87%** of members said:

In person meetings and institutes.

**79%** of members said:

Participation in KIDS NET.

**79%** of members said:

Peer learning and sharing among network members.

*"When I have a question about a policy proposal in another state, I know exactly who to start with. The ability to **immediately check in with partners** doing similar work around the country is **truly invaluable.**"*

## Trust and Support

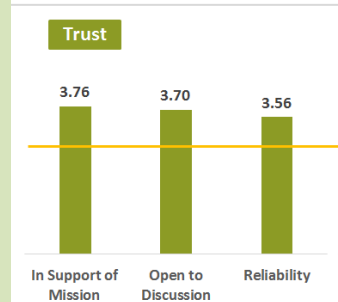
Trust is fundamental for an effective network, including having strong members who work well together, establishing clear and open communication, developing mutual respect and trust, and working towards a shared mission and goals.



79%

Said a strong sense of trust among members enabled success.

Composite score of member perceptions along three dimensions (support of the mission, openness to discussion, and reliability) indicate high level of trust (scores over 3) among grantees across the Network.



*"I cannot overstate the value of a **collegial network** of similar organizations and the opportunity to **work together and learn from each other** about a host of issues ... it is a network of **creative and talented and committed people** that can help "recharge" us as we push 'against the grain' at times."*

## STATE LEVEL NETWORKS

### State-level Networks

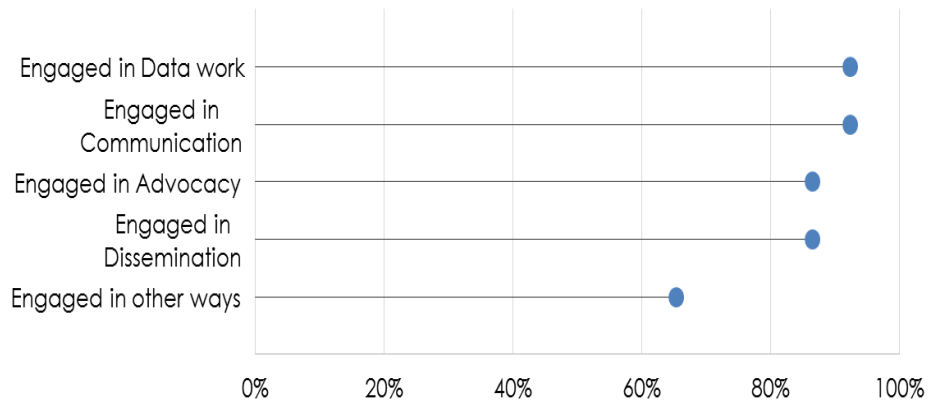
The data on the well-being of children and youth provided by the Network is crucial for policy change both nationally and locally. Data help tell the whole story by providing a state with a way to show disparities and contextualize issues. As the Network has made an intentional shift toward more advocacy work, it has had to evolve and create a strategy to best leverage the data for state and national policy reform efforts.

In addition to the national network of KIDS COUNT Network members, Casey's investment building grantees' organizational capacity and leadership has started to shift towards members' ability to lead and work collaboratively within their own state networks, a commonly mentioned characteristic across all grantees. These state networks include nonprofit organizations, government partners, foundations, and private businesses. On average, network members reported that 38% of their KIDS COUNT work is accomplished with the help of partners that are not in the national network. The figure below illustrates the ways in which network members engage with state partners. As one grantee explained, they use "KIDS COUNT to broker new partnerships with expert nonprofits to help build a bridge between the expert, the data and a policy maker."

*"Our work is completed by **leveraging our partnerships**; we rely on others to obtain data, learn about developments in politics and participate in community-based coalitions to advance policies that support children and families."*

## Type of Network Member Interactions with State Partners

### Members are Highly Engaged with other Partners in their State



The strengths of the national Network can positively impact the strategy and outcomes within the KCGN members' state networks. Moving forward, the KIDS COUNT Network will benefit from examining how the Network can be strategic about these relationships to make an impact in the advocacy space and advance racial equity.

*"We work **with numerous partners in each of our core policy areas** to advance our agenda. Partners include other advocacy organizations and state agencies. We work with partners to develop a legislative agenda, build coalitions and advocate for policy changes. We also **leverage partners to share KIDS COUNT findings**. We have **a robust network of grassroots child advocates throughout the state** that helps us disseminate KIDS COUNT data to communities around the state."*

## A Shift Towards Advocacy & Race Equity

The national Network was originally set up as an information dissemination network and the place to access data on child well-being. However, in recent years, the Network has had a major shift towards advocacy and advancing race equity and inclusion (REI). This transition was able to occur because the network had a history of achieving their desired outcomes, leveraging their strengths, and exceeding their expectations.

### Advocacy

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While the KIDS COUNT Network is increasingly shifting toward a focus on advocacy, it has not yet become fully prevalent in the partnerships within the Network. Survey results show that less than 25% (n=629) of partnerships in the Network were working together on advocacy work and strategizing on policy initiatives, and less than 25% of the Network partnerships (n=541) had outcomes that led to legislative victories or targeted strategies on specific issues. These data on partnerships represent



outcomes reported as a result of organizations working together, active in advocacy work, and can serve as a baseline from which to increase these activities and outcomes in the Network.

Open ended responses add context to this data, specifically indicating that within their own state networks, there is a growing interest and capacity for advocacy work: *“Previously, we have provided data to others to advocate, and we have provided data to policy makers without any recommendations. We have prided ourselves on being known as an impartial source of reliable, objective data .... We are just beginning to explore how to also become advocates, without sacrificing the credibility built up over years of work. We are grateful to [Casey] for helping us think through our next steps in this regard.”*



The degree to which each Network member can engage in advocacy is precluded by organizational constraints: “As a [organizational type of] grantee, we're limited in the partnerships we engage in, as direct advocacy is discouraged for [our] employees.” Insofar as each state differs in how their partnerships and networks are structured, the role that the KIDS COUNT organization plays within these partner structures can range from the dissemination of KIDS COUNT data through organizations around the state to actively working with partners to advocate for change. When asked to describe their state networks, 4 members did not mention or did not engage in advocacy work, 28 described nascent efforts around advocacy, 16 were more consistently engaged with partners in advocacy work, and 2 had well established advocacy focus.

“We are still engaging partners and identifying roles and relationships.”

“We ...partner with other state advocacy organizations by providing data and strategizing on capacity and advocacy.”

“We work with partners to develop a legislative agenda, build coalitions and advocate for policy changes.”

“[Our board] advocacy committee designs and implements legislative trainings, develops relationships with legislators and advocates for change.”

## Race Equity

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Survey respondents highlighted the focus on race equity as an important move forward in their work. Below is a selection of comments from network members that illustrate their support for the integration of race equity into the work of KIDS COUNT.

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“[The Network has] a shared vision for children and families and a greater focus on race equity.”

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“I think the Network helps disseminate concepts like race equity throughout the country much more quickly than would otherwise be possible.”

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“I’m very excited about the recent focus on equity issues. I think some Network members had not previously considered equity and inclusion a core part of their work. The Network’s continued work in this area has opened a lot of eyes internally, I suspect, which in turn, has the power to change the perspectives of stakeholders and legislators throughout the country.”

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“The KIDS COUNT Network has achieved a great deal this year in terms of building the capacity around race equity. That should not go unnoticed, as it is essential for all the grantees to feel grounded in this work. The Network is letting grantees start from where they are, rather than expecting everyone to be at the same place and that is refreshing.”

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## CULTIVATING A WELL-FUNCTIONING NETWORK THROUGH STRATEGIC THINKING AND ACTION STEPS

The Network is an example of a high functioning information dissemination network for data on child well-being. By leveraging the strengths of this Network and combining it with the advocacy already being done across the county by the Network members, the Network has evolved as a leader in child well-being advocacy. In order to sustain a high-functioning network, it is important for the Network to continue building the strengths of the members, and leverage those as future shifts are required. This will be a catalyst for the Network’s success as both a data and advocacy hub.

Networks need time to grow and evolve. By setting a strong foundation with feasible goals, instead of trying to accomplish everything at once, networks can have a higher potential for success. The KIDS COUNT Network was able to grow and achieve their initial goal as an information dissemination network, and then make the necessary shift into advocacy to achieve their next set of outcomes. This incremental approach allows for the natural progression of a network to move from a focused to a more expansive goal and tends to be more successful.

Certain characteristics of the Network stand out as exemplary and can be guiding as a model for others seeking to engage in the network way of working, by building cross-sector organizational relationships to achieve a shared goal. These include:



- Creating a shared identity and mission, across a national Network of organizations
- Utilizing a steering committee governance model to increase shared learning and representative input from Network members; identifying roles for Network members
- Fostering a peer-to-peer learning environment to leverage member expertise and resources
- Producing common products (e.g. KIDS COUNT data books) that can be similarly branded and disseminated
- Extending the national Network by leveraging state and local networks, to facilitate increased resource and support mechanisms, to strengthen partnerships with impacted communities, particularly communities of color, and to disseminate learning and products
- Leveraging these state and local networks to focus on new initiatives such as advocacy and race equity (or other special topics)
- Evolving based on lessons for how to promote collaboration and partnerships; adapting the growth of the network based on these learnings

An ongoing challenge for decision making related to investments of time and money in networks is whether to support the expansion of the network, versus focusing on improving the quality of existing relationships, regardless of how the number of connections change, or both. By using these data to “see” the network map of relationships among members, networks can assess whether the ways that grantees already connect is sufficient and future efforts should be spent on strengthening existing ties, or whether to diversify ties and increase the breadth of who is connected to whom. For example, gaining understanding of who in the Network can serve as “bridging” organizations to expand the diversity of connections, particularly when those connections extend to opportunities to be more racially inclusive, can be an intentional network building strategy.

## Conclusion

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Often when networks of organizations evolve over time, there is an expectation that more partnerships interacting more frequently will lead to greater success. However, research from the field of network science has taught us that more is not always better, and rather, it is the quality and content of relationships that are key to a network’s success. If a network perpetually tries to grow and strengthen all of its ties, without a strategy to reduce burden on the network members and a focus on sustainability, the network members are at risk of being overburdened and unwilling to engage. In the case of KIDS COUNT, a well-functioning group of organizations with growing partnerships is evident. As these partnerships evolve, thinking critically about how to engage members in ways that can leverage existing ties, and drawing on existing resources and relationships as new projects and activities arise, will be key to keeping engagement and value high. For example, if the network has a new focus, rather than proposing a “new” set of relationships or work, a first-step strategy for any network might be to identify existing resources or relationships that can be leveraged for the new task. Tackling each new task with a goal of limited asks of network members can result in high returns when members feel that their time and existing efforts are being well-utilized.

Strategies that continue to foster strong governance in the network are also key to a sustainable future for the KIDS COUNT Network. While the steering committee framework is a strong structure of

governance, it can serve to marginalize those that are not included in that approach. A deliberate communication structure built on trust and transparency, can mediate any power imbalances that are sometime felt in a strong core governance structure. As the Network evolves, rotating leadership and filtering information in a quick and clear manner will likely result in increased buy in and engagement from all members.

In the case of the KIDS COUNT Network, the funding and resources provided by Casey are key to its success. Additionally, as a Network based in data-driven decision making, the Network lends itself to be a learning network by using data for its own growth and innovation. The Network uses data:

- As a basis for a conversation among network members
- To meet network members' needs
- To tell the story of their work
- To improve their collaboration, communication structures, and resources

This context has facilitated an effective and responsive Network. While all networks have different goals, functions and reach, the success of the can contribute to the conversation about organizational connections and the essential elements that cultivate a well-functioning network.

*"[The network] is **flexible and responsive** to the changing landscape, --that has allowed organizations from far removed locations to identify similarities and to **collaborate and grow.**"*



We are grateful to the support from Casey to complete this report; the views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of Casey

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