For Immediate Release

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Strengthened Tool Promotes Equitable Investment in California Children and Families
New Data and Features Enhance the California Strong Start Index

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA – A powerful tool that can help guide critical resources to California's newborns and their families in need is now even stronger thanks to new features and richer data.

 Today, the Children's Data Network and the First 5 Association of California unveiled the newest iteration of the California Strong Start Index, a free online resource that uses statewide data to identify areas where babies, young children, and families may need more support. The enhanced index now features data on recent birth cohorts, from more geographical areas, and by racial and ethnic group.

"All babies deserve a strong start in life, regardless of their race, ethnicity, or where they were born and live," said Kim Goll, First 5 Association Executive Committee President and Executive Director of First 5 Orange County. "It's imperative that people with the power to make decisions about where funds are allocated understand the conditions into which our state's babies are born. By consulting the Strong Start Index, they can ensure resources for young children and families go where they are needed most."

Each year, nearly half a million infants are born in California. Their human, social, and material assets vary widely, with significant consequences for growth, resilience, and well-being throughout their life. Research emphasizes the importance of early childhood experiences in promoting positive adolescent and adult behaviors.

Since its launch in 2019, the Strong Start Index, funded by the Heising-Simons Foundation and with critical infrastructure support from First 5 LA and the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, has helped government officials, service providers, and others identify areas where those assets might be lacking for newborns and their families. The data tool analyzes 12 indicators available in state birth records that researchers have found are related to positive outcomes throughout life.

Those indicators include family-related factors like being born to parents with a high school diploma or college degree, health-related factors such as healthy weight at birth, supportive resources like access to timely prenatal care, and financial benefits like the ability to afford and access health care.

"Research has consistently shown that these factors are tied to a greater likelihood of having healthy and thriving infants who grow into resilient adolescents and adults," said Agnieszka Rykaczewska, Evaluation and Learning Manager at First 5 LA. "Because this index gathers data from across the state for all births each year, we can use it as a vital input to help us determine where more early childhood efforts should be directed."

Strong Start Index scores are calculated by adding the number of assets available to each baby and averaging them at the census tract level. Detailed maps at the Strong Start Index website reveal neighborhoods where newborns have more or fewer supportive resources, ensuring that decision makers can guide investments to the communities with greatest need.

The site now includes data through 2017 and allows users to compare multiple years of data to understand how neighborhoods have changed over time. Users can also view Strong Start Index scores by city and federal legislative districts, and researchers and others can download the full data set for independent analysis.

For the first time, information is also available by race and ethnicity, revealing disparities among infants from different backgrounds and born into different communities. For example, the racial/ethnic distribution of communities with the highest average number of assets look very different from the communities with the lowest average number of assets. Specifically, in 2017, communities characterized by births with the greatest advantages were also communities into which overwhelming numbers of white and Asian/Pacific Islander children were born. Meanwhile, Latino and black children found themselves born into communities with the least advantage and the lowest average number of assets. This is only one example of the information that can be gleaned from this dynamic policy and research tool.

"One of the goals of the Strong Start Index is to shine a light on the variation that exists in our communities," said Emily Putnam-Hornstein, director of the Children's Data Network and an associate professor at the USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work. "The racial and ethnic disparities confirm what we see playing out in our child care settings, schools, health clinics, and communities across California. And although these conditions at birth don't predetermine the future of any given newborn, understanding differences can guide thoughtful support to ensure children with fewer resources find themselves on a level playing field with their peers."

To learn more about The Strong Start Index, please visit www.strongstartindex.org.

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First 5 Association of California
First 5 Association is a nonprofit membership organization that advocates for and works with the state's 58 First 5 county commissions to build strong, effective and sustainable systems serving California's youngest children and their families.

Children's Data Network
Based at the Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work at the University of Southern California, the Children's Data Network is a data and research collaborative focused on the linkage and analysis of administrative records. In partnership with public agencies, philanthropic funders, and community stakeholders, they seek to generate knowledge and inform policies that will improve the health, safety, and well-being of our children.

The Heising-Simons Foundation
The Heising-Simons Foundation is a family foundation based in Los Altos, California. The Foundation works with its many partners to advance sustainable solutions in climate and clean energy, enable groundbreaking research in science, enhance the education of our youngest learners and support human rights for all people.