

# PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

## Report ranks Pa. 13th as life improves for kids

By The Associated Press

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WASHINGTON -- Fewer American babies are dying, kids are less likely to live in poverty and fewer youngsters are dropping out of school than in the mid-1990s.

Despite the improvements, nearly one in six young adults -- 3.8 million Americans from 18 to 24 -- was not enrolled in school, had no job and held no degree beyond a high school diploma in 2002, the Annie E. Casey Foundation said in its annual Kids Count report.

The report, released today, shows improvements in the lives of children early this decade compared with the mid-1990s.

Between 1996 and 2001, improvements were cited in eight of the 10 indicators that the report uses to measure success. Among those measures: children in poverty, children living with a parent who lacks a secure year-round job and children dropping out of high school.

The report found conditions for children the best in Minnesota, followed by New Hampshire and New Jersey. Conditions were the worst in Mississippi, then Louisiana and New Mexico.

Pennsylvania ranked 13th overall, which Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children President Joan Benso said is not something to be proud of.

"Pennsylvania is stuck," said Joan Benso. "We're nowhere near an esteemed level and we're worse than some of our economic competitors."

She blamed Pennsylvania's "scattershot approach" to public policy.

"We rarely identify a social problem, come up with a solution, test it, grow it and take it to scale," she said. "We have a piecemeal approach. One year we talk about early childhood, the next year it's summer jobs and the next year it's schools. We don't grow our efforts to scale."

Child advocates flagged what they called a disturbing trend: 15 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds are "disconnected," meaning not in school or the workplace. The number of those young adults grew by 700,000, a 19 percent increase over three years.

"Over 3.8 million disconnected youth face a greater likelihood of bad outcomes, now and in the future, which hold severe implications for our society," said Douglas W. Nelson, president of the foundation, a private research and grant-making concern that focuses on children.

On the upside, 21 states and Washington, D.C., improved on at least seven out of 10 indicators of child well-being. Thirty-five states and Washington improved on at least six out of 10 indicators.

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The study linked some of the good news to economic growth and expansion of public programs during the period covered. The data covers years before the economy grew sluggish.

Benso said Pennsylvania's bright spot was in the percentage of children without health insurance at 8 percent. The national average was 12 percent. She attributed Pennsylvania's success to the state's Children's Health Insurance Program and its bipartisan support.

The national report, based on government data, found that between 1996 and 2001:

- Infant mortality -- death during the first year -- fell 7 percent, from 7.3 deaths for every 1,000 live births to 6.8 deaths. Despite national progress, the infant mortality rate increased in 11 states and went unchanged in two.
- Child deaths declined to 22 out of every 100,000 children ages 1 to 14, from 26 per 100,000. The child death rate increased in five states: Alaska, Delaware, Kentucky, New Hampshire and Oklahoma.
- Teen deaths by accident, homicide or suicide dropped 17 percent. In 2001, there were 50 deaths for every 100,000 teens, compared with 60 in 1996.
- Births to teenagers fell in every state, leading to a record low. In 2001, there were 145,324 babies born nationwide to girls ages 15 to 17.
- The high school dropout rate fell to 9 percent in 2001 from 10 percent in 1996.
- Child poverty fell to an all-time low of 16 percent in 2000. It fell 24 percent between 1996 and 2001, declining in nearly every state. More recent data show the rate inching close to 17 percent in 2002.

Two indicators showed negative trends:

More babies are being born dangerously underweight, weighing less than 5.5 pounds, putting them at risk of developmental problems. In 2001, 7.7 percent of all babies were born at a low birthweight -- up from 7.4 percent in 1996.

There also was a 4 percent increase between 1996 and 2001 in the number of families headed by a single parent.

*Staff writer Maggi Newhouse contributed to this report.*

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