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## **Report: Our children at risk**

### **State figures show Erie, Crawford counties' kids face more obstacles**

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Crawford County women are younger and less educated when they have children compared with mothers across the state.

One in four Crawford County children is born to a woman who hasn't earned a high school diploma, and one in nine is born to a woman younger than 20 — both higher than the Pennsylvania averages.

These children are less likely to be ready for school and do well in the classroom, reported a statewide nonprofit children's advocacy group.

"The concern is that children with moms who are young or who didn't graduate high school is that they are more likely not to live in a family that understands the importance of reading," said Joan Benso, chief executive of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children. "They are more likely to live in a family where academics are not stressed."

PPC officials recently released the State of the Child in Pennsylvania — 2004 report. It's a biannual study that focuses on challenges facing the state's children and their families. Those challenges include early childhood education, access to health care and after-school programs.

The 2004 report includes a county-by-county breakdown, and the news isn't good for Erie and Crawford counties, Benso said.

"Erie and Crawford counties are not doing better than elsewhere in the state, or the counties that surround them," she said.

Benso pointed out that more than two-thirds of children in Erie and Crawford counties have two parents who work full time. The problem, especially at this time of year, is who is home to supervise the children.

"This is especially important for middle school and young high school children," Benso said. "Are they doing something in the summer to further their education or advance a particular interest? Or do they have nothing to do and are more likely to get into trouble?"

Children in Erie and Crawford counties also were more likely than children throughout Pennsylvania to have suffered substantiated cases of neglect or abuse. However, Benso said, that might be due to better detection and investigation of suspected neglect and abuse cases by county agencies.

She also downplayed Erie County's increase in children's deaths from 33 per 100,000 in 1993 to 45.2 per 100,000 in 2001, the most recent year for which statistics are available.

"The incident rate for Erie County is so relatively low compared to other counties that you don't want to read too much into it," Benso said. "It's probably two or three more car accidents on icy roads."

Statewide, Benso said, one Pennsylvania child in three relies on state or federally funded health insurance, and half of the state's rural children live in low-income families.

"Getting these low-income children insured has been a great success story for Pennsylvania," Benso said. "Now we want the state's policymakers to do the same thing in other areas, like investing in parenting programs for first-time mothers, and preschool education programs and summer programs to keep teenagers busy."

@ For more information about the State of the Child in Pennsylvania — 2004 report, visit [papartnerships.org](http://papartnerships.org).

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