

Tracking welfare of York County children

A new report looks at risk factors that can hold kids back.

By JENNIFER NEJMAN
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A report with specific York County data found poverty and other social issues that can affect the quality of children's lives are not solely York city problems.

Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children released the information today, after last week's release of the 2004 Kids Count data book, published by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

The report found one in three York children live in a low-income family. Outside the city, one in five children live in a low-income family.

Other social indicators, some of which are intertwined, include children born to mothers without early prenatal care, children born to mothers who are younger than 20 years old, and children born to mothers who have less than a high school education. The report also looked at school test scores and out-of-home placement for children.

"Our perception is generally these problems are contained in our cities," said Joan Benso, president and CEO of the partnership. She believes the report shows otherwise and pointed to the number of students in schools not in the city who scored poorly in math on PSSA tests.

Areas in which the rates for York County have improved since 1993 include children born to mothers without early prenatal care, infant mortality, child deaths and child abuse or neglect cases.

York County did worse in two categories: unemployment and children born with a low birth weight. Two other categories remained steady: children born to mothers under age 20, and children born to mothers who have less than a high school education.

York has a higher rate of young mothers than similar cities in Pennsylvania, Benso said. One in four children in York are born to mothers younger than 20. Erie, Allentown and Lancaster all have lower rates. Harrisburg is the same as

York, she said.

"What you should be really concerned (about) the rate of babies being born to young mothers is how prepared are they to raise those babies?" Benso said.

A young age for the mother often means children are more likely to grow up poor and won't be as ready for school as their peers, she said.

"The age of the mother at the birth of a child is one of the single largest risk factors for the entire life of the child," Benso said.

She believes the issue should be attacked from both ends — preventing teen pregnancy and providing resources, such as early childhood education services, for children of young mothers.

Joe Fay, executive director of the Pennsylvania Coalition to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, said problems related to poverty are tied to teen pregnancy.

Fay used to work with the York City Health Bureau.

Schools are required to provide AIDS education, but the content of sex ed programs varies from district to district, and Fay has found that only one-third of teens say they've talked openly about sex with their parents.

Sometimes, information about birth control, oral sex and masturbation is excluded from school-based programs, Fay said, adding that federal funds have been directed to abstinence-only programs, which he believes do not work as well.

"Parents are basically clueless about what's going on," he said. "If (parents) are silent, then they don't have control over what's happening."

Benso said the Partnerships for Children report points to the need for more funding for early childhood services and education in the state.

Andrea Giano, social service manager at Head Start of York County, said the demand is the same in both the city and country.

The program, which provides social interaction and

education, has enrolled 411 children between the ages of 3 to 5 years old, she said. But the waiting list for Head Start is twice as large as enrollment, she said.

Parents will place their child's name on the waiting list as a 1-year-old. They are hoping to secure their child a spot in Head Start by the time he or she reaches 3, Giano said.

A child is enrolled based on their family's income, situation and where they live.

Federal funding has been steady, but there isn't enough money to expand the program, she said.

"If (children) get a poor start in life," she said, "they are less likely to succeed later on, and the costs to society accumulate in terms of remedial education, criminal justice, welfare, and lost economic productivity."

Reach Jennifer Nejman at 771-2026 or jnejman@ydr.com.