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5038 Study: Welfare of children dips

PORTLAND (AP) — The well-being of Oregon children has slipped over the last year according to a recent nationwide report on kids, crime, poverty and health.

In a snapshot of all states published in the Annie E. Casey Foundation's 1999 annual Kids Count Data Book, Oregon's ranking dropped to 29th place from last year's spot of 23rd.

"We were never a shining star," said Gary Dombroff, director of Children First for Oregon, a nonprofit advocacy group. "But this has been a pernicious, precipitous drop."

The study, which gauges the quality of children's lives through trends in crime, poverty, health and other factors, is considered one of the most comprehensive measurements of child well-being in the nation. Although many of the report's statistics date back to 1996, the effort produces one of the only comparisons among states.

In this year's study, New Hampshire ranked the highest in child well-being; the District of Columbia held the lowest spot.

In Oregon, the study bears the worst news for teen-agers: While the national dropout rate dipped by 9 percent from 1985 to 1996, Oregon's high school dropout rate has jumped by 33 percent. More than a quarter of Oregon students quit school before they're scheduled to graduate.

Oregon's ranking is particularly alarming to children's advocates because of the state's relatively healthy economy. In the early 1990s, the state held a prouder 18th ranking.

The report cites several factors as having the most profound effect on families — poverty, unemployed parents, single parent households, lack of health insurance, poor parental education and welfare dependence.

Those factors have not been combated with effective public spending, said Bob Applegate, spokesman for Gov. John Kitzhaber.

Idaho loses ground for children

BOISE (AP) — More teen-agers were sticking with school, fewer children were dying and the number of low birth-weight babies was declining, but Idaho still lost ground among the other states in overall child well-being, according to a new national report.

The 1999 Kids Count report released today dropped Idaho from 20th to 23rd among the states, based on 1996 statistics. A notable increase in the rate of infant and teen deaths combined with what appeared to be effects of the state's slowing economic expansion compared to activity in other states to cause the decline.

"The rising economic tide has yet to lift the boats of too many Idaho children," said Helen Stroebel, director of Idaho's Kids Count program. "For these kids, the odds against success are enormous."

The state's ranking, in the report financed by the non-profit Annie E. Casey Foundation, had improved each year since it dropped to 25th in the survey released in 1995. The year before that, Idaho ranked 15th.

The report found nearly 29,000 children live in what it called high-risk families — generally very low-income households on welfare with just one parent who has dropped out of high school or has no steady full-time job.

Eighteen percent of the state's 348,500 children lived in poverty in 1996 — almost 63,000. But while the percentage had not changed from the previous three years, its ranking among the other states has steadily fallen since 1990, even as Idaho's economy expanded and its unemployment rate fell.