Oregon a tougher place to raise kids

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U.S. survey: *State drops from 29th to 40th for services and aid to children, families at poverty level*

PORTLAND (AP) — A national survey of the best places to raise children puts Oregon near the bottom of the list.

Oregon ranked 40th in the poll — which compiled national data ranging from child poverty to juvenile crime — registering a sharp drop from last year's ranking of 29.

The report, issued Tuesday by the Children's Rights Council, is the most recent indicator that despite low unemployment, a strong economy and a national reputation for livability, many of Oregon's children are not faring well.

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"We recognize that this state has a challenge in front of it in terms of taking care of its children," said Bob Applegate, spokesman for Gov. John Kitzhaber.

The Washington, D.C.-based Children's Rights Council survey follows a May survey by the national Annie E. Casey Foundation that also showed the quality of children's lives declining in Oregon.

The latest report measured each state and Washington, D.C., in the following areas: rates of child abuse and neglect, immunizations under age 2, high school dropouts, child poverty, child deaths, infant mortality, mothers not receiving prenatal care in the first three months of pregnancy, juvenile arrests, teen births and divorce.

Rankings were based on the average of all 10 factors for each state.

The survey ranked Maine as the best place to raise a child. The District of Columbia placed last, but several Western states joined Oregon on the bottom of the list.

Oregon may have earned a poor ranking because it isn't helping the families who need

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Children: Services not available for those in poverty

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state assistance the most, said Betty Uchytil, policy coordinator for the state office for Services to Children and Families.

"Oregon is a good place for intact families," she said. "But for a family living in poverty, services are not as available."

Still, Oregon parents shouldn't panic about the condition of child services, said Gary Dombroff, director of Children First for Oregon.

"We are confident that Oregon is a wonderful place to raise a child," Dombroff said. "What this kind of report suggests, though, is that we have lots of places to improve."

Dombroff said Oregon needs to devote more time and resources to its teen-agers, citing statistics showing a 33 percent increase in the teen drop-out rate and a 26 percent jump in the teen birthrate from 1985 to 1996.

That situation isn't likely to change soon, he said, criticizing the level of funding for teen programs recently approved in Salem.

"My judgment is that the outcomes of this past legislative session are likely to perpetuate this stagnation," Dombroff said.

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