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Oregon flunks for kids

□ *Oregon needs to address issues related to children's quality of life*

Oregon's unbalanced tax system is taking its toll on children, especially those whose families are struggling financially from paycheck to paycheck. Oregon is one of the worst states in the nation to raise children, according to a recent study by the Children's Rights Council. The study provides one more piece of evidence that since Measure 5 and its limit on property taxes, Oregon's tax structure is in need of overhaul.

THE STUDY PLACED Oregon 40th in a list of the best places to raise children. Oregon's ranking has declined every year since 1995, but only this year did it fall into the bottom 12 along with the likes of Idaho (41st), Mississippi (42nd), Nevada (44th), California (46th) and the District of Columbia (51st). Western states, as a whole, fared poorly. States in New England scored the best, with Maine number one followed by Massachusetts, Connecticut, Vermont and New Hampshire. North Dakota, of all places, rated fifth. The political realities, too, between the Northeast and West are vastly different.

The report might be taken as "just another study" by some. But the factors considered in compiling the report are important issues pertaining to young peoples' well-being: 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. The rankings were based on the average of all 10 factors for each state.

Another study, one released in May by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, also showed the quality of children's lives declining in Oregon.

All this despite Oregon's growth rate.

THE PROBLEM, at least in the view of Betty Uchytel, policy coordinator for Services to Children and Families, isn't one that every family in Oregon has to fear. Oregon's tax troubles have reduced services to people living in poverty. Programs to address social services for people in need, public safety and other issues that relate to quality of life have taken a back seat ever since Measure 5 was passed. That measure virtually forced Oregon's hand when it came to budgeting.

Oregon has a problem, as the Children's Rights Council study demonstrates. No solutions surfaced out of the 1999 Legislature. But one of these days, Oregonians are going to have to do some soul-searching and ask themselves some important questions.

Can't we do better for our kids. Our future?