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Report says lives of kids getting better

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"Kids Count" ranks Oregon as 27th, up from last year, among the 50 states in gauges of health and schools

By ANU MANCHIKANTI
THE OREGONIAN

Oregon is doing a good job in lowering the death rate of newborns and children, in reducing teen pregnancy and in whittling down the percentage of children living in poverty.

At the same time, the state needs to work much harder to support children living in marginal economic situations and to keep teens from dropping out of school.

So says the Baltimore-based Annie E. Casey Foundation, a private, charitable organization, which will release its annual "Kids Count Data Book" today. The book, which compiles 1990-99 data from all 50 states and the District of Columbia, is intended to foster public policies, human service reforms and community support.

The new data book shows that Oregon is inching its way up the state rankings. This year's book ranks Oregon at 27th; last year, it hit a low of 29th. This is the state's first improved ranking since 1993,

when Oregon ranked 14th among states.

"We have shown a slight improvement, which is good news," said Tonia Hunt, public policy director for Children First for Oregon, a nonprofit advocacy organization. "The bad news is, we still have quite a ways to go.

"You can look at a variety of factors that are influencing these measures, but when it comes right down to it, I'm not sure we have followed through on our commitments" to children, Hunt said. "It's as simple as a lack of investments."

Despite the state's healthy economy and a low jobless rate, more than one in five of children under the age of 5 in Oregon lived in poverty in 1996, the data show.

The economic gap affects rural and poor families in the state, who are struggling with lack of employment and commercial opportunities. Data reveal that 5 percent of children in Oregon live in households without telephones, 44 percent without computers, and 70 percent have no access to the Internet.

"We are seeing a disparity happening, and it's happening nationwide," Hunt said. "I think it's happening faster in Oregon."

The state was ranked 42nd for the percentage of children living

with parents who lack full-time employment, reflecting Oregon's aggressive welfare reform effort, Hunt said.

"We see parents, more and more often, trying to piecemeal a family wage together," she said. "They do that by working multiple jobs and multiple shifts. They're not necessarily finding a job with the benefits they need, nor they are finding a job with the wage they need."

Cassandra Garrison, a policy advocate for the Oregon Food Bank, said many of the parents who seek food at her organization have jobs that pay just enough to make them ineligible for welfare.

"It doesn't take a physicist or a mathematician to realize that \$7.25 an hour is not enough for rent, food. . . . How can our children be thriving?" she said.

In these working conditions, parents can have difficulty spending time with their children, which has a huge impact on their futures, said Karmen Fore, a communications and policy analyst for the Oregon Commission on Children and Families.

Because of better access to prenatal care, in part because of the Oregon Health Plan, Oregon ranked first among all states in its percentage of low-birthweight ba-

bies, Hunt said. The state also had the fifth lowest infant mortality rate in the nation, at 5.8 infants per 1,000 live births in 1997, a 30 percent decrease since 1990.

In other categories that measured changes between 1990 and 1997:

◆ The state's high-school dropout rate jumped 63 percent, from 8 percent in 1990 to 13 percent in 1997, the largest increase in the nation. The Oregonian will publish a three-day series on the dropout rate, beginning Sunday.

◆ Oregon was one of only six states to see a rise in the number of idle teens — those not in school or working.

◆ Oregon saw a 17 percent rise in single-parent families, compared with a national increase of 13 percent.

◆ The rate of teen deaths by accident, homicide and suicide in the state declined 27 percent, while the child death rate improved by 14 percent.

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For more information on the report, go to www.kidscount.org

You can reach Anu Manchikanti at 503-294-7669 or by e-mail at anumanchikanti@news.oregonian.com