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ANNUAL REPORT MEASURES YOUTH-RELATED STATISTICS

# State gets mixed reviews on kids

Oregon ranks 27th out of 50 for the well-being of children.

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Statesman Journal

In a nationwide study of child well-being, Oregon garnered a mixed review of statistics, coming in at the top in some categories and near the bottom in others.

"Kids Count," the annual report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, was released Tuesday. The report, now in its 10th year, measures a wide array of statistics, including health care, poverty and child care.

The mix of good and bad news led to Oregon being ranked 27th out of 50 states for the well-being of children. Last year, Oregon came in 29th.

"That's good news, of course, but in 1993, we ranked 14th in the country," said Tonia Hunt, public policy director for Children First of Oregon, an independent child advocacy agency created in 1991. "Overall, we've really been sliding."

The reason, Hunt said, is a lack of commitment and investment in children.

But that doesn't seem true on the prenatal side. Oregon came in first in the nation for percentage of low-birthweight babies. In 1997, 5.5 percent of all babies in Oregon were considered too small, while the national average is 7.5 percent. Health care workers use low birthweight as a reliable indicator of poverty and teen pregnancies.

Oregon also ranked fifth in the nation for infant mortality, with 5.8 deaths per 1,000 births. The national average is 7.2 percent.

Among the dire news in the 2000 report: Oregon ranks 45th out of 50 states for high school dropouts.

Between 1990 and 1997, the most recent year for complete statistics, Oregon's dropout rate climbed from 8 percent to 13 percent. The nationwide percentage held steady at 10 percent.



Statesman Journal file

**FORUM:** Members of the public gathered at the Salem-Keizer School Board last summer to express their concerns about the high dropout rates of children in Salem-Keizer schools. This year's "Kids Count" report shows Oregon ranks 45th out of 50 states for high school dropouts.

## 1997 Oregon rankings

The Annie E. Casey Foundation ranked states in various categories, with 1 being the best. Oregon had mixed results:

- Low birthrate babies: 1
- Infant mortality rate: 5
- Deaths of children ages 1-14: 23
- Rate of teen deaths by accident, homicide and suicide: 16
- Teen birth rate: 24
- High school dropouts: 45
- Teens not working or going to school: 40
- Children living with parents who don't have full-time, year-round employment: 42
- Percent of children in poverty: 21
- Percent of single-parent families: 34

"That's truly alarming," Hunt said. "This has got to be the top priority for Oregon."

The statistics don't come as a surprise, according to Larry

Austin, public information officer for the Oregon Department of Education. He said Stan Bunn, state superintendent of public instruction, has been focusing on the state's dropout rate for some time.

"Dropout rates are too high. Stan knows that; so does everybody else," Austin said.

Besides the obvious culprits — low student success, inflexible schools schedules and the like — Austin pointed to another possible reason for the dropout rate: the strong economy, in which students can leave school and earn a decent living.

This year, Oregon also fared poorly — 42nd out of 50 — in the percent of children living with parents who do not have full-time, year-round employment. The state is ranked 40th for the percentage of teens who neither work nor attend school.

On teen deaths by accident,

homicide and suicide, Oregon's numbers dropped from 73 per 100,000 to per 53 per 100,000.

But the numbers are too mushy to be called a trend, according to Lisa Millet, injury prevention and epidemiology expert with the Oregon Health Division.

Although there has been a statewide decrease in incidents such as automobile crashes and suicides, Millet said her office generally needs 10 years worth of statistics before they call anything a trend. There also have been some "spikes," or surprisingly large numbers of such violent deaths in certain years, which make the idea of a trend problematic.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation, a private, charitable group with offices in Baltimore, focuses its efforts on disadvantaged children and families throughout the nation.