

Study: Decade mixed for infants

■ More women sought prenatal care in 1990s, but early births rose

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WASHINGTON — Pregnant women were more likely to see a doctor but less likely to be married. They were less likely to smoke, but their babies were more likely to arrive too early.

It was a mixed bag for babies in the 1990s, when there were improvements in several measures that help predict children's well-being, but setbacks too.

"Conditions at birth often reflect the forces that will shape a young person's life," said a report released Tuesday, "The Right Start," produced by Child Trends, a research firm, and Kids Count, a project that produces an annual survey of child well-being.

The report, which examined trends from 1990 to 1998 in the 50 states and 50 largest cities, said progress varied widely. Differences may be related to socio-economic, demographic and economic factors, with children born to poor women and racial minorities facing

greater risks than other new mothers.

The nation overall made more progress during the 1990s than did large cities, which lagged behind in almost every measure. And researchers noted wide variability.

Nationally, the report found progress on several measures:

•Prenatal care: Mothers who get timely prenatal care are less likely to have babies with health problems, the report said. In 1998, just 4 percent of pregnant women failed to get prenatal care, an improvement from 6 percent in 1990.

Among the 50 largest cities, there was a significant drop: from 9 percent in 1990 to 5 percent in 1998. El Paso, Texas, ranked worst, with 13 percent of moms failing to get care.

•Smoking: Nationally, the percentage of babies born to mothers who smoked during pregnancy fell from 18 percent in 1990 to 13 percent in 1998 as smoking rates among all women of childbearing age fell. The portion of children born to smoking moms ranged from 5 percent in Washington, D.C., to 26 percent in West Virginia.

•Education: 22 percent of babies in 1998 were born to mothers with less than 12 years of education, a modest drop

from 1990's 24 percent, consistent with an overall increase in high school graduation rates. Babies with poorly educated mothers are more likely to die in the first year and face a host of other problems growing up, the report noted.

The nation lost ground on other measures:

•Unmarried parents: The portion of babies born to unmarried mothers continued its steady climb, reaching 33 percent in 1994 and staying there. It ranged from 17 percent in Utah to 45 percent in Mississippi.

•Underweight babies: Babies born at less than 5.5 pounds are more likely to be sickly and die than larger babies, and often result from inadequate prenatal care. Nationally, the percentage born too small crept up from 7 percent in 1990 to 8 percent in 1998. Among cities, the average was 9 percent, with Baltimore ranking worst at 14 percent.

•Preterm births: Babies born more than three weeks early often suffer health and development problems, plus they have an increased chance of death in the first year. Nationally, the share of preterm babies edged up from 11 percent in 1990 to 12 percent in 1998.