

# Oregon can't afford to abandon

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## 'disconnected' kids

While it's gotten a bit easier to be a kid in the U.S. and in Oregon in the last 15 years, at least according to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the state still has plenty of room for improvement. Closer to home, while Central Oregon offers some services for the region's most disconnected youth, there aren't enough to go around.

The foundation's 15th annual Kids Count report was issued yesterday. It shows a nation doing somewhat better than in the past, though plenty of problems remain. Infant mortality rates, for example, have dropped from 1996 to 2001 by 7 percent nationwide to 6.8 deaths for every 1,000 live births. In Oregon, the number now stands at 5.4 deaths per 1,000. The number of teens getting pregnant also is dropping, and kids born in the state are more likely than ever to be healthy as measured by birth weight, no matter who their mothers are. Oregon leads that last category,



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in fact, with 5.5 babies born below normal weight of every 1,000 live births. The bad news? Low birth weights actually have risen in the last few years both here and nationwide. In Oregon, the number is up from 5.3 per 1,000.

But the foundation argues that fully 13 percent of young adults aged 18 to 24 are what it calls "disconnected." They're kids who are not working, have completed high school but gone no further educationally and are not enrolled in school. It will, the foundation argues, be difficult for this group to become successful adults.

A smaller number of young men and

women in the group face even worse prospects, however. These kids have been failed by the public systems that surround them: They've been in foster care, have been involved in the juvenile justice system, have become parents or have never finished high school. The numbers for Oregon are bleak: Nearly 1,400 kids in this state aged 15-19 were in foster care in 2001, and some 1,500 more kids were detained, incarcerated or placed in residential facilities that year. Almost 9,000 girls under the age of 20 were moms in 2002, and fully 22 percent of kids aged 18-24 lived in poverty that year. Those kids are almost sure to be part of the 37,000 young Oregonians the foundation calls disconnected. Getting them back on track will take more services than currently are available, driven first by a change in attitude on the part of those paying for the services.

Consider Central Oregon. Bend offers two shelters for homeless teens. One, the LOFT, run by J Bar J Youth Services'

Cascade Youth & Family Center, can house about a dozen kids, most of whom have "aged out" of the state's foster care system. The other, Grandma's House, is available specifically to homeless pregnant girls, many early teens.

Both these programs strive to give kids the skills they need to be successful adults. There's an emphasis on continuing education, on learning, at Grandma's House, how to rear a child properly, and so on. Kids at the LOFT learn to get and keep a job, manage a bank account, and so on. Both are run by wonderfully caring adults who are nurturing on the one hand but clear-eyed enough to see and work to help kids address the problems they create for themselves.

Consider, too, the number of kids having babies in the region. While the teen birth rate has dropped nationwide and in Oregon, here to 21 of every 1,000 births since 1996, that's still far too many young mothers enrolled in the Bend High teen mom program. It's difficult enough to be

a 16-year-old these days; it's infinitely more difficult to be a 16-year-old whose school day starts by hauling a toddler or baby, car seat and paraphernalia out of the car.

What makes the situation worse is a change in emphasis in recent years on providing services for the very young. Oregon concentrates its social service dollars on the youngest among us, on the theory that spending money early on saves money in the long run. It's true, of course, but it means that for teens and young adults, finding services can be difficult to impossible. Yet these kids, too,

need our help, and given the current attitude toward public spending, they're all too unlikely to get it. That's tragic. Oregon cannot afford simply to abandon its disconnected young people, though for now, at least, it's perilously close to doing just that.

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