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Poor economy threatens future kids' welfare stats — expert

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PORTLAND (AP) — A national assessment of children's welfare released Thursday shows Oregon has improved in almost all categories between 1996 and 2001, but the state's poor economy since then bodes poorly for future results, according to the policy director for a children's advocacy group based in Portland.

"We've had three years of budget cuts and flat spending on important programs. We're worried," said Tina Kotek of Children First for Oregon. "We want to celebrate we moved up in the national ranking, but we're concerned about the state of the economy for the past three years."

The state continues to have one of the lowest rates of underweight newborns in the nation, but also posted one of the nation's highest rates of children living in families with parents who have no full-time, year-round employment, according to data from the Kids Count report.

The report was released Thursday by the Baltimore-based Annie E. Casey Foundation, which studies children's issues. The report is based on government data and covers information primarily from 1996 to 2001.

Kotek said multiple factors keep Oregon having one of the lowest rates of low birthweight babies, but she credited the Oregon Health Plan in particular.

"OHP has been a model for trying to extend health insurance to working family. And that does have a positive outcome — you're getting better prenatal care and better care once the baby is born," she said.

She expects those numbers to stay good for the immediate future.

"It's positive that the state hasn't had to cut coverage for pregnant women. I think if they had cut back on those numbers, we'd see a difference," Kotek said.

In other statistics from the Oregon report:

- Infant mortality improved 4 percent from 5.6 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1996 to 5.4 in 2001.
- The child death rate improved 36 percent from 28 deaths per 100,000 children ages 1 to 14 in 1996 to 18 in 2001. Oregon was ranked ninth in the nation, which averaged 26 deaths in 1996 and 22 deaths in 2001.
- The teen birth rate improved 30 percent, from 30 births per 1,000 females ages 15-17 to 21.
- The rate of teen deaths by accident, homicide and suicide improved 28 percent, from 57 deaths per 100,000 teens ages 15-19 in 1996 to 41 in 2001.
- The percent of families with children headed by a single parent increased from 27 percent in 1996 to 29 percent in 2001.

On the Net:
Kids Count: *http://www.kidscount.org*