

Louisiana ranks at the bottom for child welfare

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Louisiana ranks near the bottom for the well-being of its children, according to an annual report that ranks states based on factors like child poverty, infant mortality, education and teen pregnancy.

Louisiana ranks 49th, with only neighboring Mississippi faring worse. The state has received this near-bottom ranking for the last decade.

The report is put out annually by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a national children's charity.

"It is encouraging to see the progress that Louisiana has made, but Louisiana's 49th place ranking shows that we have a long way to go," said Edward Ashworth, director of the Louisiana Budget Project, which monitors how government spending affects low-income families in the state. "Our children are the economic future of our state, and we must invest in their well-being if we are to have the economic prosperity we all want for Louisiana."

Nationally, the child poverty rate has increased by 18 percent between 2000 and 2009, and 2.5 million more American children are living in below the federal poverty line, the report said. Poverty is measured as an income of \$21,756 for a family of four.

Most of the data from the report is based on information from 2009.

While the state's child poverty rate improved by 11 percent to 24 percent, Louisiana still ranks in the bottom 10 states. About 268,000 of the state's children live in poverty, according to the report.

Louisiana ranked 35th in the country for the number of children living in families with both parents out of work. Thirty-three percent of children, about 374,000, had parents with no full-time income.

Teens also had problems finding work. Louisiana ranked 40th in the country for the number of teens who were not in school or working. Eleven percent of teens aged 16 to 19, or about 30,000, had left school and weren't working in 2009.

Theresa Falgoust, Kids Count coordinator for Louisiana, said knowing how many children are living in poverty is important because it can affect all parts of a child's life. Their most recent data came from 2009, she said, before the oil spill, and the situation may be even tougher for Louisiana families now.

Low-income families tend to have higher rates of infant death and low-birth birth weights in babies. Children in poverty have a higher risk of becoming teen parents and dropping out of school, Falgoust said.

Louisiana did see improvements over last year. The percent of teens who drop out of school and don't graduate dropped by 27 percent, to just 8 percent of Louisiana teenagers.

The number of teens giving birth also decreased by 13 percent to 27 births per every 1,000 teen girls aged 15 to 17 and 91 births per every 1,000 teen girls between ages 18 and 19.

The death rate for children in the state decreased by 9 percent over the last decade to 29 per 100,000 children. But Louisiana's teen death rate increased by 11 percent in the last decade to 94 per 100,000 teens, while the national teen death rate improved. That's mainly due to a high rate of car crashes and teen homicide in the state, officials said.

Infant health, including babies with low birth weights and the rate of infant death, are both slightly higher than they were in 2000. But the mortality rates have improved since 2004 from 10.4 to 9.2 deaths per 1,000 live births. The number of low-birth weight babies has decreased from 11.5 percent to 10.8 percent.

Laura Poole, director of women's services for the Women's Center at Terrebonne General Medical Center said that pre-natal care is extremely important for mothers. The hospital offers a wide variety of prenatal care to moms, as well as childbirth education programs. But moms themselves need to be in good health when they get pregnant to have good birth outcomes.

"It would be great to sit down and talk with a doctor about your health before you even think about getting pregnant," Poole said. "Look at things like where your weight is, and if you're diabetic, hypertensive, or other issues that could affect your pregnancy."

Falgoust said that's why it's important to make sure women have access to health care before they're pregnant.

"Only healthy moms make healthy babies," she said.

You can see more data online for Louisiana and the rest of the country at <http://datacenter.kidscount.org>.

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