

Ohio 28th in kids' well-being

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By Tom O'Neill Post staff reporter

The annual Kids Count analysis of the nation's childhood well-being provided a mixed bag of results for Ohio.

The good news: from 2000 to 2005, the state cut its high school dropout rate by more than the national average, ranking ninth in the U.S., and its teen birth rate from 2000 to 2004 fell from 46 births per 1,000 to 38.

The not-so-good news: Ohio improved on only three of 10 indicators of children's health and well-being, and saw its scores on the seven others fall since 2000.

Overall, Ohio ranked 28th in the report's ranking of the 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. That was down two spots from 2006, but up one from the 2005 rankings. Kentucky improved by two positions in the state-by-state rankings this year, rising to 40th. Indiana stood at 31st.

Most of the country's healthiest states for kids were in the Northeast, with Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Hampshire and New Jersey all in the top 10. Minnesota took the best care of its kids, the report concluded.

The study was released today by the Baltimore-based Annie E. Casey Foundation, which provides grants to states and advocates public policy that emphasizes children's well-being.

Cincinnati Public Schools' experience reflected the gains made in the state. Its 2006 graduation rate - the number of students graduating in four years - was 77.2 percent, up 26.2 points since 2000. But the seven-year trend of improvement has slowed in the last two years, improving only 5.1 percentage points from 2004 to 2006.

"We have made a lot of progress in improving the high school dropout rates," said CPS spokeswoman Janet Walsh. "While it's not where we need it to be, or where we want it to be, it is getting better."

Less than encouraging was that the Buckeye State's rate of teens not attending school or working rose from 7 to 8 percent from 2000 to 2005 period, while nationally during that period the rate was dropping from 9 to 8 percent.

And the percentage of children living in families without secure employment rose by 13 percent in those five years, while the percent of children living in poverty jumped by 19 percent.

Kentucky, meanwhile, improved in just four of the 10 categories: infant deaths, teen-parent births, high school dropouts and teens not attending school and not working.

"Moving in the right direction in the overall ranking is an improvement over the past couple of years, but we still rank three spots below our 2004 ranking," said Tara Grieshop-Goodwin, Kids Count Coordinator at Kentucky Youth Advocates, a Frankfort-based nonprofit that advocates for children's health and well-being.

"We ranked among the worst 10 states on four points," she said, "and until we make progress in those areas, it will be difficult to make substantial overall progress."

The findings show Kentucky ranked among the worst 10 states for its percentages of children living below the poverty line, children not in school or working, children without "securely employed" parents, and in its teen death rate.

None of which was any surprise to Sandy Dotson, a licensed nurse practitioner at Covington-based Children's Home of Northern Kentucky. The agency provides residential treatment for about 60 boys in two locations, as well as adoption home studies, in-house counseling and after-school programs.

If Dotson sees one common factor, it's economics.

"I think that has a lot to do with it, poverty," she said. "A lot of them haven't been to a dentist or had an eye

screening. I don't know how that is sometimes, because that's required by schools. Sometimes, I don't know how they got as far as they did."

And often, she added, Kentucky youngsters don't have insurance.

The state outpaced national gains in reducing infant mortality, improving by 6 percent to 27th overall in the U.S.

"I think the Kids Now initiative with Gov. Patton began to focus attention on early childhood," said Tom Lottman, deputy executive director of Covington-based Children Inc. "And two, because of the public and media's awareness of early brain development, there's more of an advocacy."

He said one of the bigger stumbling blocks continues to be providing access to quality early-child education to the children most in need of it, and the low salaries that discourage educators.

"It's an economic issue in that early-childhood educators are paid less than parking lot attendants," he said.

United Way of Greater Cincinnati is trying to improve early childhood programs in the region with its Success by 6 initiative. The program is tailored to the needs of each individual community it works with, but many aim to improve school readiness through advocacy and community change.

"United Way has as its primary goal area making sure children are prepared to succeed," said Carol Aquino, spokeswoman for the United Way. "A critical piece of being prepared is having a quality preschool experience, and Success By 6 is working toward that piece."

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