



University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development

background

Report # 26

Pennsylvania's Children

November 1999

Pennsylvania's Children

a report on their well-being

Losing Ground

Child poverty continues to climb; death rates up

The same report that delivers encouraging news of falling child abuse and school drop-out rates also makes a sobering observation – child poverty in Pennsylvania is rising and the Commonwealth is losing ground in other areas important to the well-being of children.

Rising child poverty rates are troubling. Poverty is associated with a wide range of conditions that put children at risk.

In fact, the number of low birth-weight babies has risen across the Commonwealth and more children are reported living in foster homes or other temporary shelters as a result of the court removing them from the custody of their parents.

The trends are reported in *The State of the Child in Pennsylvania: A 1999 Guide to Child Well-Being in Pennsylvania*. It is the latest review of child well-being indicators issued by the Pennsylvania KIDS COUNT Partnership, which includes the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development and Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children.

Here is a summary of the findings that show troubling trends.

Children In Poverty

Children who live in poverty are at extreme risk of encountering a range of problems that threaten their futures.

Poverty contributes to many problems that dim the prospects of children and families. Poverty, for example, is associated with higher rates of infant mortality, slow cognitive development, poor parenting, low education levels, and an increased likelihood that children will become involved in crime.

On the other hand, families with greater financial resources are typically able to offer their children broader experiences, opening the door to more opportunities, higher levels of confidence, and greater aspirations and expectations – all of which make success more likely.

In Pennsylvania, the news on this front is not good. Despite a strong economy, the child poverty rate rose from 15.7% of children under the age of 18 in 1989 to 17.3% in 1995, according to data generated by the U.S. Bureau of Census.

Among urban counties, the highest rate of child poverty is reported in Philadelphia, where 37% of the children lived in poor families in 1995.

In Allegheny County that year, 18.3% of the children were poor. Although Allegheny's child poverty rate was half that of Philadelphia's, it represented a 7% increase over the county's 1989 rate of 17.1%

The highest child poverty rates in rural counties were found in Fayette,

related reports

Signs of Improvement

Fewer cases of child abuse, and falling teen birth and school drop-out rates top the positive trends related to the well-being of Pennsylvania's children. *See Report 25.*

where 30.8% of the children lived in poor families in 1995, and in Greene, where 27% of the children were poor.

Bucks and Montgomery had the lowest rates of child poverty among urban counties. Among rural counties, the lowest child poverty rates were found in Adams, Butler, Franklin, Juniata, Monroe, Perry, and Pike counties.

Low Birth Weight

Birth weight is important to a baby's survival, health, and development.

Babies born at low birth weight – less than 5 pounds 9 ounces – are more likely to die during their first year, experience a number of health problems and disabilities, and struggle in school later in life, especially if they are raised in unsupportive environments.

Throughout Pennsylvania, the number of babies born at low birth-weight has

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inched steadily upwards since 1983, when 6.7 low birth-weight babies out of 100 births were reported. In 1996, the rate reached 7.5 low birth-weight babies for every 100 births

On a positive note, the rate of low birth-weight births has fallen among African American babies. However, the rate has increased among Latino and Caucasian babies.

Child Deaths

A statewide decline in the infant mortality rate is tempered by a recent rise in the number of children aged 1-19 years who die each year as a result of accidents, illnesses, and violence.

From 1996-1997, the child death rate in the Commonwealth rose from 32.7 deaths per 100,000 children to 36.3 deaths per 100,000 children – reversing a seven-year trend that saw the rate of child deaths fall by 5%.

The rate of violent deaths also increased recently. Violent deaths include children who die as a result of automobile and other accidents, suicide, and homicide. In 1996, 20.8 violent deaths per 100,000 children were reported. In 1997, the rate jumped to 23 violent deaths per 100,000.

Single-Parent Homes

Being raised in a single-parent home does not guarantee despair. But it does increase the likelihood that a child will experience other factors that contribute to poor outcomes, such as low family income, teen parenthood, and lack of adequate child care.

The rate of children living in single-parent homes continues to rise steadily across the state, jumping from 15.4% in 1980 to 25% in 1997. One in four children in Pennsylvania now live in single-parent homes.

The number of children in foster care and other out-of-home placement increased across Pennsylvania. But changes in federal law that give counties incentives to more quickly place children in permanent homes may reduce those numbers in coming years.

Urban counties generally have the highest rates of children in single-parent homes.

Out-Of-Home Placement

Removing abused and neglected children from the custody of their parents, while necessary to protect them, is not a panacea.

Out-of-home placement can pose significant risks to the outcomes of children, particularly those who are left to drift from one temporary foster home to another. Such experiences can contribute to insecurity, diminished ability to trust, trouble making friends, and disruption at home and school.

Pennsylvania is seeing increasing numbers of children who are removed from their parent's custody and placed in foster homes or other temporary, out-of-home settings.

This trend continues despite a drop in child abuse cases. Nearly 8 children

out of every 1,000 were in foster care or another type of temporary placement on any give day in 1997. In 1990, only 6 out of every 1,000 were in placement.

In 1997, Allegheny, Crawford, and Philadelphia counties had the highest rate of children in placement in the state. Juniata county had the lowest, with only .7 children per 1,000 in out-of-home placement.

The good news is that placement numbers are expected to decrease in coming years. The federal Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 provides incentives to quickly place children in permanent homes, whether it means returning them to rehabilitated parents or putting them up for adoption. In Allegheny County, for example, changes in the law, dependency procedures and court reform contributed to fewer out-of-home placements in 1999.

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references

This report was based on the following publication:

Bergsten, M.C., & Steketee, M.W. (1999). *The State of the Child in Pennsylvania: A 1999 Guide to Child Well-Being in Pennsylvania*. State of the Child in Pennsylvania Fact Book series. Harrisburg, PA: Pennsylvania KIDS COUNT Partnership.

For copies of the full report, contact Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, Suite 300, 20 North Market Square, Harrisburg, PA 17101-1632; (717) 236-5680 or 1 (800) 257-2030; email: info@papartnerships.org; on the Internet: <http://www.papartnerships.org>.

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