

## STATE AND REGIONAL NEWS

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### Alabama improves from 48 to 47 on Kids Count survey

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MONTGOMERY — Fewer high school dropouts and a lower teen birth rate helped Alabama move up a spot on a national child welfare survey, but the state still ranks among the lowest in the nation.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation released its 2008 Kids Count data book today and Alabama ranked 47th in the nation, a slight increase from 2007 when it was in 48th place. It found an increase in babies being born with low birth weights and more kids living in poverty in Alabama. Researchers used data from 2000-2005 to develop the rankings.

Ten benchmarks are used to measure states, including infant mortality rate, percent of teens not in school and not working, percent of children in single parent families, teen death rate and percent of children in homes where neither parent has a full-time, year-round job.

Alabama improved in five of the areas, worsened in four and stayed the same on its infant mortality rate.

The percent of children living in poverty rose to 23 percent in 2006, compared to the national average of 18 percent that year.

"That's the number that concerns me the most," Linda Tilly, director of Voices for Alabama's Children, said. "Because while poverty doesn't necessarily doom a child to failure ... children in poverty are more likely to reach lower levels of educational attainment and lower lifetime earnings."

Kids raised in poverty are more likely to become teen parents, often have poor physical and mental health and are more likely to face criminal charges, she said.

The high school dropout rate improved 31 percent, from 13 percent in 2000 to nine percent in 2006, an increase education advocates attributed to Alabama's efforts with pre-kindergarten programs and the Alabama Reading Initiative.

State Health Officer Don Williamson said he was most troubled by the low birth-weight category, which showed a rise from 9.7 percent in 2000 to 10.7 percent in 2005.

"It's not surprising," said Williamson, who has been pushing for the state to develop a Fetal Infant Mortality Review board to research the cause of death for each child under a year old. "Is it disturbing? Absolutely," he said.

Williamson said the situation can be improved with the creation of the board and Alabama doing more to get medical care to women who don't have private insurance.

The study also looked at juvenile justice, finding that Alabama has higher numbers of youth in custody for nonviolent offenses — 78 percent compared to the national average of 66 percent.

Gov. Bob Riley signed a bill last month that would avoid locking up such youth and send them to community programs instead of detention centers.

"If I were sitting here looking at Alabama ranking 47th and I didn't know that the state was dramatically addressing the way it handles juvenile detention and I didn't know that we had the Alabama Reading Initiative and Alabama First Class Pre-K, I would be much more concerned," Tilly said. "But because I know that in many ways the state has listened to the wake-up call that Kids Count gives, I am encouraged about the future. It doesn't change overnight."