

The Huntsville Times

Editorial: Make children's lives better

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If the results of the annual Kids Count survey announced Wednesday reflected how well we do in Alabama in taking care of our children, we'd flunk again.

The 2011 data ranked Alabama 48th nationally in the survey of children's quality of life issues done by The Annie E. Casey Foundation. That represents a slide from 47th in 2010 as the recession eroded the economic gains of poorer families. Alabama has ranked as high as 43rd in the last 10 years, 47th three times and 48th six times. To be sure, the circumstances of children's lives have improved in Alabama over the years, but other states have made progress, too. Scored on its rate of progress, Alabama tied for 18th best from 1990 to 2000, and tied for 16th best from 2000 to 2005.

"We actually are getting better. It's just that while we're getting better other states are getting better as well," Linda Tilley, executive director of the advocacy group VOICES for Alabama Children, told the Associated Press. "It's just that we were so behind to start with."

In the latest rankings, Alabama improved in three categories of children's well-being but lost ground in five others.

The child death rate per 100,000 children ages 1 to 14 fell 15 percent from 2000 to 2007, the teen birth rate fell 13 percent from 2000 to 2007, and the number of teens not in school who do not have a high school diploma fell 46 percent from 2000 to 2008. Those are good reasons for encouragement.

But the percentage of low-birthweight babies increased 9 percent from 2000 to 2008, the infant mortality rate increased 5 percent from 2000 to 2007, and children living in single-parent families increased 11 percent from 2000 to 2009.

In at least one case, there has been marked improvement. The Kids Count survey used the 2007 infant mortality rate, and State Health Officer Don Williamson said the rate dropped to 8.2 percent in 2009. But he told the AP that figure is still too high.

"The things we continue to have problems with relate to poverty," Williamson said. One out of four children in Alabama lived in poverty in 2009, an increase of 19 percent from 2000. Poverty often explains a lot, including low high school graduation rates and the lack of medical care in many areas.

The solutions to these problems are known, and in some cases Alabama has made important progress. Tilley notes that improving reading achievement scores eventually should lead to a higher graduation rate.

Gov. Robert Bentley helped prevent Alabama from sliding further behind when he insisted this spring that the Legislature maintain the state's support for Medicaid, the health insurance program for the poor.

But it will take more support from the governor and the Legislature to make headway on a problem that has a solution.

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