

The Daily Home

State ranking of 47 on Kids County survey an improvement

By Chris Norwood

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The 2008 Kids Count Data Book, published Thursday, shows the state of Alabama as a whole improving in several areas, but still ranked at only 47 out of the 50 states.

New Mexico, Louisiana and Mississippi were ranked 48th, 49th and 50th, respectively. According to a press release from Voices For Alabama's Children, which released the report, "five of 10 measures reflecting child well-being in Alabama show increasing signs of progress. Overall, the 19th annual Kids Count Data Book puts Alabama trends on par with national trends."

The release goes on to say that "adolescents fare best in Alabama. They are safer and more likely to be enrolled in school as compared with a decade ago. The teen death rate, teen birth rate, percentage of teens who drop out of high school and percent of teens not attending school and not working are four areas in which Alabama can boast improvement. In addition, the child death rate has also improved."

On the other hand, "indicators that detail the welfare of babies are either stable or worsening. The infant mortality rate had no change while the number of low birth weight babies increased." Many of the areas where the state is lagging involve financial indicators at home. Some 23 percent of Alabama children live in poverty, a full 2 percentage points higher than the national average, for example. Similarly, 37 percent of Alabama's children live with a single parent, as compared to 32 percent nationally. More than one third, or 36 percent, of children in the state lives in a family where no parent has full-time year round employment, compared with 33 percent nationally.

This year's report also contains a new section dealing with another troubling set of figures. According to the press release, "For every one youth detained and committed to state juvenile justice systems nationally, nearly two are detained or committed in Alabama. Similarly, more young people are behind bars in Alabama for non-violent offenses such as shoplifting, disorderly conduct, truancy, running away from home or ungovernable behavior."

Linda Tilly, executive director of Voices for Alabama's Children, was optimistic about further improvements next year. "The expansion of high quality pre-k, the Juvenile Justice Act of 2008, and the initiatives at the Department of Children's Affairs offer solutions that will make a difference for Alabama children and improve our future Kids Count standings," Tilly said. "Alabama is like the train in the children's story 'The Little Engine That Could.' We are moving forward, gathering momentum and making some hard won improvements for children. But we still have to cross over that mountain and right now, other states are going as fast or faster and

making more progress than we are.”

The Annie E. Casey Foundation, which conducts the national Kids Count survey, “is supporting pilot programs for detention alternatives in four Alabama counties,” the release said. “Local Juvenile Detention Alternative Initiative sites in Montgomery, Mobile, Jefferson and Tuscaloosa counties separate youth who pose significant risks from those who do not. The idea is to reduce the overall use of confinement. Such programs will help improve future child well-being in the state.”

Nancy Buckner, assistant director of the Talladega County Department of Human Resources, agreed the juvenile initiative was crucial. “But it’s also important for counties to have access to programs like that. The bill that was passed in the Legislature this year is wonderful, but there has to be a mechanism for all counties in the state to be able to participate.”

Buckner speculated that the continuing trend for low birth weight was due to “the continuing, horrific drug problems we see, especially in women of childbearing age. And they don’t get any prenatal care, among the other problems. But I am pleased to see us making some improvements as a whole. We’ve made tremendous strides in child welfare, and I think that will continue with dependant children. But the powers that be need to understand that the dollars need to be put up on the front end, when they are young, rather than on the backend, when they are incarcerated later. That doesn’t help the state or anyone else. The idea is to make them productive citizens from the get-go.”

St. Clair County DHR Director Cherri Pilkington expressed similar sentiments. “I think we’ve seen real improvements here the last few years because of partnerships with the schools, the juvenile probation office, the judges and us. We’re able to get in and work with children and their families. You know, our department has been through a federal review, and we have been top rated for our child welfare practices. Those practices not only improve child safety, but I believe it makes families stronger, too.”

Pilkington also said the Juvenile Justice Act of 2008 would improve Alabama’s standing. “For the areas where we do need to improve, I think we need education and resources. The community needs to come together, identify these populations, identify what resources they need, and get those resources to the people who need them. For issues like poverty and low birth weight, it’s just a question of hooking them up with people who can help them.”

The statistics released Thursday apply to the state of Alabama as a whole only. The county by county break-downs are typically released in late August or early September.

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