



Well-being of Alabama children must improve

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The newly-released survey of the well-being of children in Alabama has some notable highlights, tempered by some setbacks.

It's a mixed bag, but one thing is certain. Alabama's rating of 47th among the 50 states is up a notch up from last year, but it's still unacceptable.

However, give full credit for the improvements. For the period of the study, 2000-06, the child death rate in Alabama fell by 4 percent, as did the rate of teen deaths. The teen birth rate was 18 percent better; and in the most notable advance, the rate of high school dropouts improved by 31 percent. The rate of teens not attending school and not working improved by 8 percent.

Yet there was no change in Alabama's infant mortality rate. Also, the number of low-birthweight babies worsened by 10 percent.

Other setbacks were rises in children living in families where no parent has full-time, year-round employment, 3 percent; children living in poverty, 10 percent; and children in single-parent families, 6 percent.

The figures come from the "2008 Kids Count Data Book," a survey released annually by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Officials said the bright spots reflect new or expanded state programs like pre-kindergarten, the Alabama Reading Initiative, the All Kids health insurance program and the Alabama Juvenile Justice Act. They are expected to continue to improve conditions for Alabama children in the future.

For example, Alabama was noted for having an "over-reliance on incarceration" with 1,752 children ages 10 to 15 in custody on an average day. The rate of 201 per 100,000 children is strikingly higher than the national rate of 175 per 100,000. But the Legislature recently passed a revised juvenile code that addresses more appropriate treatment for youngsters who commit nonviolent offenses.

Of more immediate concern is the sharp increase in low-birthweight babies. Those infants are 20 times more at risk of dying than babies born at a normal weight, said state Public Health Officer Don Williamson. He said the problem is that 25 percent of the state's pregnant women do not get adequate health care.

The setback in children living in poverty — 10 percent — also should be of concern to policy-makers. As Linda Tilly, executive director of the advocacy group Voice for Alabama's Children, says, poverty “correlates to so many negative outcomes.”

What can Alabama do?

A good first step would be repealing the state's sales taxes on groceries, a measure that failed in the Legislature this year.

Then the state needs to find ways to continue to fund and expand programs that have proven effective. To do that, lawmakers should seriously consider comprehensive tax reform.