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Alabama fails its kids: Report ranks state 47th in nation

By *Kenneth Mullinax*

Poor kids don't go to the doctor enough, don't get help with their homework, and don't eat as much as they should to be healthy, all reasons that an annual survey cites for Alabama being one of the worst states in the nation to be a kid.

The KIDS COUNT 2008 Data Book ranks Alabama 47th for overall child well-being, a notch better than last year.

Four other Southern states rank in the bottom six -- Arkansas is 45th, South Carolina is 46th, Louisiana is 49th and Mississippi is 50th. The survey, funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, lists New Hampshire as the best state in the nation for children.

"Almost every state that appears in the bottom of the ranking ... have a higher concentration of families and kids who live below the poverty level," said Linda Tilly, director of the non-profit VOICES for Alabama's Children.

The survey measures 10 areas -- child death rate, teen death rate, teen birth rate, teen dropout rate, truant and unemployed teens, low birthweight babies, kids from families where no parent has a full-time job, poor kids, kids living in single-parent home and infant mortality.

Alabama improved in the first five categories, held steady in infant mortality, and took a step back in the other four categories.

"Alabama can be extremely proud of the progress its made recently, but because other states are also progressing in terms of taking care of their children, our ranking remains near the same place as before," Tilly said.

Gains can be attributed to new or expanded state programs, she said.

"The recent expansion of high quality pre-kindergarten programs, the Alabama Reading Initiative, our state's All Kids health insurance program and the Alabama Juvenile Justice Act are all making a positive difference for our children, and will improve our KIDS COUNT data standing in the future," Tilly said.

The state is a leader in juvenile justice reform, said Danielle Lipow, coordinator of the Alabama Youth Justice Coalition.

"Leaders in every branch of state and local government have recognized that our Alabama can no longer afford the fiscal or human costs of our current juvenile justice system," she said.

While the KIDS COUNT data show a state youth custody rate higher than the national rate -- 201 vs. 125 -- legislators, judges and corrections officials are steadily making the juvenile justice system better for children and families, and more accountable to taxpayers.

Lipow cited three initiatives to reduce the number of youths who are incarcerated and to expand community-based correctional alternatives.

- The Alabama Juvenile Justice Act of 2008 passed unanimously by the Legislature, phases out the secure custody for non-criminal children and ensures greater representation for children in juvenile court.
- A juvenile court pilot program in Jefferson, Montgomery, Tuscaloosa and Mobile counties, called the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative, protects the public while reducing the number of youths locked up awaiting trial.
- A program to develop community-based alternatives for kids, started by Gov. Bob Riley and the Alabama Department of Youth Services, helps decrease the number of children in the state's juvenile prisons.

Decades of research show, according to Lipow, that incarceration is the most expensive and least effective way to reduce juvenile crime. Up to 80 percent of youths released from juvenile correctional centers are rearrested within two to three years -- even non-serious offenders.

The state recorded a 10 percent increase in the number of low-birthweight babies, according to the report.

"A low birthweight for a newborn infant increases its risk of death 20 times more than that of a baby born at a normal weight," said Dr. Don Williamson, Alabama's Public Health officer. "Too many pregnant mothers -- 25 percent in Alabama -- get inadequate or no prenatal care."

Infants and pregnant women are not getting adequate health care, though children are, he said.

"Alabama has been recognized recently for being in the top third in the nation for providing quality health care for its children through our All Kids state children's health insurance program," Williamson said.

All Kids is administered by the Alabama Department of Public Health and provides coverage for children in working families whose income is above Medicaid limits and below 200 percent of the federal poverty level, which is approximately \$42,000 a year for a family of four.

Tilly credits the All Kids program as one of the factors that will continue to help the overall state of children's well being in Alabama and eventually help raise its KIDS COUNT score in coming years.

"This is a prime example of how Alabama's leaders have stepped up to the plate to enhance the health and well being of our children, which enhances their lives, makes them feel better and creates a positive ripple effect such as helping them do better in school," she said.

"A child born into poverty isn't doomed to a life of failure," Tilly said.