



University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development

background

Pennsylvania's Children

a report on their well-being

Signs Of Improvement

Fewer abuse cases among encouraging trends

Lower school drop-out rates and fewer cases of child abuse and neglect top the list of statistical measures that show improvement in the well-being of Pennsylvania's children.

Encouraging trends are also seen in other measures important to the well-being of children, such as the number of expectant mothers who get early prenatal care, and the number of babies born to young, single mothers.

But those improvements are tempered by evidence that some serious problems are getting worse in the Commonwealth including child poverty.

The trends are reported in *The State of the Child in Pennsylvania: A 1999 Guide to Child Well-Being in Pennsylvania*. It is the latest review of child well-being indicators issued by the Pennsylvania KIDS COUNT Partnership, which includes the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development and Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children.

Here is a summary of several statistical indicators that report encouraging news.

School Drop-Out

The school drop-out rate in Pennsylvania's public schools is on the decline. After rising sharply in 1992 to three drop-out cases for every 1,000 children, the rate has fallen to two cases per 1,000 children.

The falling drop-out rate is an encouraging for several reasons.

Children who drop out of school face difficult futures. Research shows that when compared to those who finish school, drop-outs are less likely to hold a regular job, and the jobs they land are generally lower-paying, less stable, and offer fewer opportunities for growth.

Abuse and Neglect

Abused children are more likely to do poorly in school, have health problems, and be arrested later as juveniles and adults.

Recent trends in substantiated cases of abuse and neglect are heartening. From 1990-1997, the statewide total of cases reported each year dropped from 7,951 to 5,691. And the rate of abuse and neglect cases per 1,000 children fell from 2.8 to 2.0 over the same period – a decline of nearly 30%.

It should be noted that those statistics tell only part of the story. The

related reports

Losing Ground

Child poverty in the state has increased, along with the number of child deaths, and the number of low birth-weight babies born.

See Report 26.

incidence of abuse is believed to be much higher than the number of cases that are reported to child welfare authorities.

Trends in child abuse and neglect are among the indicators that bear watching as new welfare-to-work policies take hold. More low-income parents are likely to experience stress as they find employment outside the home, deal with the pressures of the workplace, coordinate transportation and child care, and manage their finances. They may also have less time for children, all of which could lead to higher rates of abuse and neglect.

Prenatal Care

Prenatal care early in a pregnancy is important to the survival and well-being of infants. Mothers who receive proper prenatal care are much more likely to deliver normal weight, health babies.

In Pennsylvania, the number of

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expectant mothers who fail to get prenatal care during the first trimester of their pregnancy has fallen steadily. In 1996, 16% of pregnant women did not seek early care compared to 21% of pregnant women in 1989.

More intensive outreach and wider access to publicly-funded health insurance this decade are two reasons why more women are seeking early prenatal care.

Lack of early prenatal care remains a concern, however. Overall, one in six women in Pennsylvania still fail to get early prenatal care. And African-America and Latino women are still twice as likely not to seek early prenatal care than whites.

Infant Mortality

The latest numbers show the rate of infants who die before their first birthday in Pennsylvania to be holding steady.

From 1995-1996, the statewide infant mortality rate stayed at 7.7 deaths per 1,000 babies. And among African-Americans the infant mortality rate fell during that period, from 17.5 deaths for every 1,000 babies to 16.6 deaths.

Previously, the overall state infant mortality rate had fallen steadily since 1983, when 11 out over 1,000 babies died before their first birthday.

Young, Single Mothers

After 15 years of rising teen birth rates, Pennsylvania experienced a slight decrease in the number of children born to single mothers under the age of 20. Between 1995 and 1996, births to young single mothers fell from 9.6% to 9.4%.

However, one out of 11 babies in Pennsylvania is born to a single, teen-aged woman.

In the wake of welfare reform, indicators of child well-being may help determine how new welfare-to-work rules affect children of low-income parents.

Research suggests that the teen birth rate is an important indicator of a number of potential problems for mother and child alike. Teen mothers, for example, are less likely to finish school, and more likely to face financial hardship in their lives and spend time on welfare. High teen birth rates are also associated with other problems such as low birth-weight births, lack of prenatal care, and infant mortality.

Regulated Child Care

High quality child care is important. It helps children develop in many ways so that they are prepared to learn when they enter school. It also allows parents more time to work outside the home and is considered a key resource for parents who are moving off welfare.

Access to child care is widening across Pennsylvania. Spaces in state-regulated centers and family and group child care homes increased from 227,000 to 276,000 from 1993-1998.

During the same period, regulated child care spaces per 100 children in need increased 10% across the state.

Meeting the need for regulated child care remains a challenge, however. The demand is rising across the state as a healthy economy and welfare-to-work policies drive up the number of working single parents and the number of families in which both parents work.

Head Start Enrollment

Early childhood education is becoming more and more important to a child's success in school, particularly during the early grades. For low-income families who cannot afford private preschool, the federal government offers Head Start, a pre-kindergarten program.

In Pennsylvania, children enrolled in Head Start increased from 25,000 to 27,000 from the 1995-96 and 1998-99 school years. And enrollment in 1998-99 was up about 35% over 1992 enrollment.

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references

This report was based on the following publication:

Bergsten, M.C., & Steketee, M.W. (1999). *The State of the Child in Pennsylvania: A 1999 Guide to Child Well-Being in Pennsylvania*. State of the Child in Pennsylvania Fact Book series. Harrisburg, PA: Pennsylvania KIDS COUNT Partnership.

For copies of the full report, contact Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, Suite 300, 20 North Market Square, Harrisburg, PA 17101-1632; (717) 236-5680 or 1 (800) 257-2030; email: info@papartnerships.org; on the Internet: <http://www.papartnerships.org>.

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