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Michigan improves in giving babies the Right Start

Six of eight areas show progress; nonmarital birth, low birthweight worsen

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A collaborative project of
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MICHIGAN'S CHILDREN

LANSING -- Michigan has improved in six of eight areas needed to give babies the right start in life, with some dramatic reductions in the rates of teen births and mothers who smoke, a new report released today concludes.

The *Right Start in Michigan – 2009* report, by the Kids Count in Michigan project, reviewed 15-year trends, from 1992 to 2007, in the state, the 83 counties, and among the 69 communities with populations of 25,000 or more. The report focused on maternal and infant risks across three county groups defined by population size.

“We found some very big improvements,” said Jane Zehnder-Merrell, Kids Count in Michigan director and a senior research associate at the Michigan League for Human Services. “Michigan has made a lot of progress when it comes to reducing smoking among pregnant women, reducing the rate of teen births and the rate of repeat teen births—those teen mothers who have another child before the age of 20.”

Over the 15-year period, smoking by pregnant women dropped by more than one-third, while teen births and repeat teen births declined by more than a quarter.

Doug Paterson, interim executive director of the Michigan Council for Maternal and Child Health, said he was heartened by improvements noted in the report.

“I think that this shows that when we have the will we find the way—and results will happen. Reducing prenatal smoking and teen pregnancy have both been a focus of public health prevention work for years, and it is paying off,” he said. “I am concerned that with budget cuts looming that include cuts to the programs we have used as our tools, we will lose much of the progress we have made.”

Smoking during pregnancy was the only factor that showed substantial variation among the three county groups, with urban counties reflecting half the rate of smoking (13 percent) among pregnant women than the mid-sized counties (22 percent) and rural counties (27 percent).

The report, however, also found some worsening trends that put children at risk. The rate of nonmarital births grew nearly 10 percent over the trend period. In 2005-2007, nonmarital births represented about two of every five births in Michigan.

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The rising trend between 1993 and 2007 was most apparent among women in their late 20s. Almost 30 percent of Michigan mothers in their late 20s who gave birth in 2007 were unmarried, up from 20 percent in 1993—a 46 percent increase.

Children born to single mothers face high risks of poverty, and for unmarried mothers living with the child’s father, the risk of a break up is double that of married women.

In addition, the percent of low-birthweight babies also worsened by roughly 10 percent over the trend period. About 10,600 Michigan infants are born each year weighing less than five and one-half pounds.

“Having a healthy weight at birth is a key goal of the medical community. As a group representing pediatricians, we know kids who start life too small or too early face higher risks and more hurdles than other children. We must redouble our efforts to make progress in this area,” said Denise Sloan, executive director of the Michigan Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Judy Samelson, executive director of the Early Childhood Investment Corp., said the report highlights the need to invest in programs that will help more children arrive at kindergarten ready to learn.

Some of the programs cut or threatened with cuts in the state budget debate include state-paid early childhood programs for children at risk for learning problems and the Nurse Family Partnership and Interconception Care project, which were targeted in communities with the high rates of low-birthweight babies and infant mortality.

“Even in these tough economic times, Michigan must invest in the programs that not only give children the right start in life at birth, but keep them on a steady path to become tomorrow’s highly educated workforce,” Samelson said.

Summary of statewide changes in rates

Improving trends:

Smoking during pregnancy: declined 34 percent

Births to teens: declined 26.2 percent

Repeat births to teens: declined 28.7 percent

Births to women with less than 12 years education: declined 15 percent

Women who received late or no prenatal care: declined 15.1 percent

Preterm births: declined 9.2 percent

Worsening trends:

Nonmarital births: up 9.7 percent (*measured since 1995*)

Low birthweight babies: up 9.8 percent

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Kids Count in Michigan is a collaboration of the Michigan League for Human Services, which researches and writes state-level reports, and Michigan's Children, which works with communities to bring attention to the reports' findings.

The state project is part of a national effort to measure the well-being of children at state and local levels. The state project is supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation of Baltimore, The Skillman Foundation of Detroit, the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan Foundation and the Michigan Association of United Ways.

The Michigan League for Human Services is a statewide, nonprofit and nonpartisan organization that advocates for low-income residents of Michigan. It has more than 1,500 members from labor, business, faith-based organizations, social service professions as well as concerned citizens. Contact Jane Zehnder-Merrell at (517) 487-5436.

Michigan's Children is a statewide, independent voice for children and their families, working with lawmakers, business leaders, and communities to make Michigan a place where all children have the opportunity to thrive. Contact Michele Corey at (517) 485-3500.

The Michigan Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics is a diverse group of over 1,700 pediatrician including general pediatricians, sub-specialists, and academicians. Members are active in promoting the health and well being of the children of the state of Michigan. Contact Denise Sloan at (517) 484-3013.

The Michigan Council for Maternal and Child Health educates and informs policymakers, community leaders, and service providers about the importance of prevention and intervention in our health care and human services systems. Contact Doug Paterson at (517) 482-5807.

The Early Childhood Investment Corp. is charged with implementing the Great Start Blueprint, with the vision to make every child in Michigan safe, healthy, and eager to succeed in school and in life. Contact Judy Samelson at (517) 371-9000.