Survey: Conditions for La. children worst in nation

State officials say astute ranking should serve as wake-up call

By KRISTEN KING
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Louisiana has the worst conditions for children than any other state, according to the latest annual Kids Count ranking of states based on the educational, economic, social, and physical well-being of their children.

Some officials who work with Louisiana children say that this year, perhaps, the state's typical ranking at the bottom of the barrel will serve as a wake-up call.

"For it to change, we all have to care that everybody rises up," said Gwen Hamilton, executive director of the Children's Cabinet, a planning group in the Governor's Office that coordinates education and other activities affecting children.

"People generally have an attitude of 'My kid's OK. My relative's kids are OK. My neighbors' kids are OK.' Then they forget about it," said Hamilton.

The survey ranks Minnesota as the best state for children, followed by New Hampshire, North Dakota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Utah, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Jersey and Maine. All of those states also were in the top 10 last year.

The worst 10 states, from best to worst, are Arizona, Georgia, South Carolina, West Virginia, Tennessee, New Mexico, Alabama, Arkansas, Mississippi and Louisiana. They also were the worst 10 states last year.

Louisiana's other neighbor, Texas, ranks 37th in the latest survey. Susan Johnson, Kids Count coordinator for the New Orleans-based Agenda for Children, said Louisiana legislators must make children and family issues more of a priority immediately.

She said her group is concerned about the state's budget crunch threatening cuts in funding for the Department of Social Services and the Department of Health and Hospitals - two agencies that serve children and families.

"Also, the proactive steps we could be taking to turn this data around, no one's even thinking about," she said. "It's madness when we're ranked 50th in the nation to not invest in our children. No matter what we have to do, we ought to do that."

The Kids Count report is compiled by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a private, charitable organization based in Baltimore that aims to improve the outlook for disadvantaged children.

The report is based on 1997 data, the most recent available. The report ranks the states on 10 factors. In previous years, Louisiana and Mississippi have swapped the 49th and 50th spots.

This year, the survey used a different source to determine the percentage of children in poverty, which factors into the overall ranking.

The group recalculated states' rankings using 1990, 1994 and 1996 data. Based on those recalcualtions, Louisiana ranked 49th every year until 1997 data resulted in the state slipping to 50th.

Amy Ritalo, a research associate for the Casey Foundation, said Louisiana's low ranking should be alarming, but that the slip from 49th to 50th isn't that telling.

"There is certainly a difference between being 25th and 50th or being 1st and 50th," she said.

Ritalo said that in general, between 1990 and 1997, Louisiana followed similar trends as the nation, including improvement in most areas. But Louisiana started at the bottom and is still there, she said.

Ritalo said one promising statistic is that the percentage of children living in poverty here decreased from 1990 to 1997 despite an increase nationally.

However, Louisiana still ranks last in that category. It is tied with Mississippi and West Virginia, with 30 percent of children living in poverty.

Johnson said Louisiana could improve its ranking by improving health care for children.

The Louisiana Children's Health Insurance Program - a federal-state partnership that provides health insurance coverage for children in families with incomes up to 150 percent of the poverty level - must expand, said Johnson and others.

Susan Hynel, with the local Community Action for Children, said she gets lots of calls from parents who can't afford health insurance for their children. Most of those parents are single mothers with jobs, she said.

"This is the working poor. They may have two jobs but they don't have health insurance for themselves or their children, Hynel said.

Hynel said she wants the program expanded but that her group has not recommended it because the money's not there.

Also, she said, the program already expanded once, when the income limit was raised to 150 percent of the poverty level from 130 percent. The program started in 1998.

Hynel said the Children's Cabinet also is working on a comprehensive proposal to streamline services for children and families. They now are provided by several state agencies.

The proposal will address health care and focus on improving early childhood services, such as preschool offerings, she said.

Hamilton and Hynel said improvements in early childhood programs will have a positive effect on all other aspects of the Kids Count survey.