Future painted bleak for La. children

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NEW ORLEANS — This portrait of a Louisiana child is grim.

One of three live in poverty. He or she has slightly better than a 50-50 chance of graduating from high school on time, if at all. And the specter of a violent death is on the increase.

Put together, Louisiana ranks 49th among the 50 states and the District of Columbia in 10 indicators of child well-being, according to a report compiled by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, which advocates overhauling welfare programs.

Only Mississippi and the nation’s capital were worse.

In every category, Louisiana fell below the national average. And in several comparisons between 1985 and 1991, the state’s picture got darker.

Louisiana’s child poverty rate was the second highest in the nation, with 32.8 percent of all children living in families with incomes below the poverty line. In 1985, the figure stood at 28.4 percent.

During the same time, the national rate actually fell slightly, from 20.8 percent to 20 percent.

Judy Watts, president of Agenda for Children in Louisiana, said part of the problem can be blamed on the state’s economy, which has been in the doldrums since the petroleum price crash of the 1980s.

“Given a weak economy, it’s a whole lot more difficult to mitigate the effects of poverty,” Watts said. “But I think the other reason is that we really haven’t made any effort in Louisiana. We have acknowledged there is a problem with our children, but we have not yet addressed that with policy and dollars.”

Various state agencies that handle children — welfare, health and hospitals, and corrections — need to realize that they are dealing with the same problem: children in trouble, Watts said.

“It’s not unusual for several different case managers to be working with a family and they never talk to each other,” she said.

At the same time, many government programs need to take an all-new approach.

“For example, if it becomes necessary to take a child out of a family, we should address it at a community level, such as group homes, rather than institutionalization,” Watts said. “It’s cheaper, so it’s not a matter of dollars.”

Between 1985 and 1991, the state’s violent death rate for teen-agers rose from 74.9 per 100,000 to 94.8. The national rate jumped at a slower clip: 62.8

To 71.1.

“Kids are angry,” Watts said. “They look around and see a remarkable distortion in the distribution of wealth. They feel the effects of that. They feel the effects of racism. It manifests itself into violence. It’s an everyday feeling of being discounted.”

Like the national rate, there was a slight drop in the number of children graduating from Louisiana high schools on time. The state rate dropped from 56.7 percent to 56 percent; the national average fell from 71.6 percent to 68.8 percent.

Watts said the main problem behind the high dropout rate is a “serious, serious lack of adequate, meaningfully paying jobs.”

“Kids don’t see that it’s worth it,” she said. “We graduated from high school because we felt it would be worth it. That carrot has been chewed up.”

Watts said solutions, both long-term and short-term, would depend upon “making work pay.” Since the first step out of poverty is usually a low-paying job, government must help with child care, transportation and universal health care, she said.

“We’re going to have to keep working toward a stable economic base in this state,” Watts said.