50th in the nation
Louisiana behind in caring for children

By Bill Decker
Staff Writer

A quarter of Louisiana’s children are growing up without fathers in their homes. And even when fathers are present, nearly half of them can’t make enough to support their children more than at a poverty-level income, says an annual study of child welfare statistics.

The study says number of Louisiana kids in single-parent homes skyrocketed from 1985 to 1992. Not so coincidentally, Kids Count says, Louisiana has the biggest percentage of kids living in poor homes in the nation — more poor kids than even Mississippi, which so often comes in 50th to Louisiana’s 49th in a variety of health and welfare statistics.

The Anne E. Casey Foundation in Maryland commissions the study each year, the study focuses on a new child-welfare issue. And in 1995’s study — which covers statistics from 1985-92 — the issue is fathers and their ability to earn enough money to care for their families.

It’s a tough issue for Louisiana:
- Between 1985 and 1992, the number of single-parent families in Louisiana grew by nearly a third. By 1992, 31 percent of families had a mother or a father but not both.
- Most often, the single parent is a mother. About 23 percent of all Louisiana children live in homes with no men. And 15 percent of the state’s kids live in neighborhoods where at least half the families are headed by a single mom.
- About 45 percent of Louisiana’s young live in homes with poverty-level incomes. In 1993, the poverty line was $14,700 for a family of four.

That’s not surprising, given the earning power of Louisiana men ages 25-34. Kids Count says only 60 percent of men that age can give their offspring a home with an income over the poverty line.

Sonja LeBlanc is a licensed professional counselor and the director of children’s and adolescent services at Acadia Mental Health. She said children really do have a tougher time growing up in a home with only one parent.

“There are some obvious things,” LeBlanc said. “The kids tell me they feel different if they don’t have a father if it’s a boy, or a mother if it’s a girl.

“After some time, they’ve been cheated out of a parent. But it’s not a hopeless situation.”

Many children with single parents grow to identify with stepparents, teachers, church leaders, even sports stars. But as they grow to adolescence, they begin to miss the parent they don’t have.

The single parent may feel the loss, too, LeBlanc said. He will miss the emotional support and the back-up that another parent can provide.

LeBlanc said groups like Big Brothers and Big Sisters can improve the life of a fatherless or motherless child.

“It’s not impossible,” LeBlanc said. “A lot of good things can happen.”

But good things aren’t happening to Louisiana’s single-teen birth rate. While teen births are leveling off in much of the rest of the country, Louisiana’s teen birth rate is up by nearly a third over 1985.

On the positive side, Louisiana is making strides in keeping newborns alive. The number of infant deaths per 1,000 live births has fallen by 20 percent since 1985.