Substantial obstacles face many La. students

By KRISTEN KING
Advocate staff writer

One of every five children in Louisiana faces at least four substantial obstacles to becoming a healthy, productive, employed and educated adult, according to a survey released today by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

The 1999 Kids Count survey, which for 10 years has examined indicators of children's well-being, this year includes data on those who meet more than one risk factor.

These children, considered "at high risk," grow up in at least four of the following six conditions: poverty, a family on welfare, a single-parent home, without a working parent, with a parent who has a high school dropout and without health insurance.


"One of the things the research in this book shows is that the impact of negative risk factors is compounded.

In Louisiana, 22 percent of the state's 1.2 million children, roughly 262,000, met at least four of those factors in 1996, according to the survey.

That's a higher percentage than any other state. Only the District of Columbia, with 39 percent, is worse.

Nationwide, 16 percent of children were in the same boat.

The survey says such children are 26 times more likely to become a teen-age mother than children who meet none of the factors.

Johnson said children facing more than one risk factor are the ones that need the most attention.

"A lot of kids without any of these risk factors have difficulty," she said. "But if a child is facing more than one, it has an exponential effect.

"A child living in poverty and also with an unemployed parent in a single-parent household is at far greater risk for a host of negative outcomes.

Johnson said looking at the problems together underscores the need to tackle solutions as a whole.

"You can't look at any factor in isolation," she said. "You cannot try to address the issue of teen pregnancy outside of that child's neighborhood and family. You really have to take a look at the whole and not just at the child.

The annual Kids Count survey looks at 10 factors affecting children and ranks the performance of states and the District of Columbia in each category.

The performance of the nation in each category also is included.

Several of the categories use 1996 statistics, but some are an average of data from 1995 through 1997 or from 1994 through 1998.

The results for each category are listed as 1996 findings, and findings from 1995 are listed for comparison purposes.

Louisiana improved in some areas in 1996, enough to beat out Mississippi in an overall ranking for the first time in six years.

Louisiana is ranked 49th, Mississippi is 50th and the District of Columbia is 31st, where it has been every year since the survey started.

New Hampshire is ranked first followed by North Dakota and Minnesota.

Susan Hymel of the local Community Action for Children said the data is too old to reflect the impact of recent programs, like the reading initiatives in the public schools and welfare reform.

"It's difficult for us who know we've written grants to counteract this data, and we can see the difference" those grants have made, she said.

At the same time, Hymel said the survey shows both encouraging and disappointing results.

"We're improving, and in some cases we're improving faster than the nation," she noted.

The state's high school dropout rate, for instance, was 12 percent in 1996 and 15 percent in 1995.

That 3 percent point difference means the state's rate improved 20 percent during that time.

The nation's dropout rate of 10 percent in 1996 fell 1 percentage point from 1985, representing a 9 percent improvement in that time period.

Hymel also pointed to the state's teen birth rate, which improved in 1996 to 43 births per 1,000 females ages 15 to 17 from 48 in 1985.

The nationwide birth rate in 1996, while still better than Louisiana's, was 44 births per 1,000 females ages 15 to 17, up from 31 in 1985.

The most troubling aspect of the survey deals with the types of homes Louisiana children are growing up in, Hymel said.

"The disconcerting thing for me is where we stand on that risky place for children who don't have enough financial resources and enough adults involved in their lives," Hymel said.

For instance, 32 percent of children in the state were in poverty in 1996, compared with 28 percent in 1995.


Also, the percent of families with children headed by a single parent was 35 percent in 1996, up from 23 percent in 1985.

Nationwide, 27 percent of children were in such families in 1996, up from 22 percent in 1985.

And, 39 percent of Louisiana children lived with parents without full-time, year-round employment in 1996 compared with 38 percent in 1985.

The nationwide percentages were 30 percent in 1996 and 33 percent in 1985.

That category, in which Louisiana ranked 49th, is new this year.

Another category, juvenile crime rate, was dropped.

Louisiana ranked 39th in that category last year.

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Students

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Kids Count survey

Louisiana ranks 49th of 50 states and the District of Columbia on the well-being of children as determined by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in its Kids Count survey. The Louisiana results are compared to rates for the nation as a whole in 1985 and 1996. The 1996 data, the latest available, was used by the foundation in compiling the rankings.

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<tr>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>1985 National Rank</th>
<th>1996 National Rank</th>
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<td>Percent low birth-weight babies</td>
<td>8.7 State 6.8 Nation</td>
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<td>Infant mortality rate (deaths per 1,000 live births)</td>
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<td>Child death rate (deaths per 100,000 children ages 1-14)</td>
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<td>36 State 26 Nation</td>
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<td>Rate of teen deaths by accident, homicide and suicide (deaths per 100,000 teens ages 15-19)</td>
<td>75 State 63 Nation</td>
<td>85 State 62 Nation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teen birth rate (births per 1,000 females ages 15-17)</td>
<td>48 State 31 Nation</td>
<td>43 State 34 Nation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent of teens who are high school dropouts (ages 16-19)</td>
<td>15 State 11 Nation</td>
<td>12 State 10 Nation</td>
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<td>Percent of teens not attending school and not working (ages 16-19)</td>
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<td>Percent of children living with parents who do not have full-time, year-round employment</td>
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<td>Percent of children living in poverty</td>
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