Study ranks La. 49th in well-being of children, teens

By JOAN McKinney
Advocate Washington bureau

WASHINGTON — Many Louisiana teenagers are threatened by idleness and violence, and more than half of Louisiana’s infants are being born into unstable families, a new study concludes.

The 1993 Kids Count Data Book, which evaluates the well-being of children in the country, ranks Louisiana 49th in the nation for the endangered status of its children. Only Mississippi ranks lower.

In one category, Louisiana was judged the nation’s worst — for the percentage of its idle teenagers.

"Over 8 percent of Louisiana teens were idle in 1990 — they were not in school, not in the labor force, not in the military and not homemakers — ranking the state 50th on this measure," the study said.

The state’s teen idleness rate is 3 points higher than the national average.

"Teen idleness has profound implications for delinquency, neighborhood stability, family well-being and national productivity," the report advised.

Other statistics for Louisiana teenagers were also bad.

The state’s teen violent death rate, which measures those who died from accidents, suicides or homicides, increased 54 percent from 1985 to 1990, according to the study. The state ranks 49th in this area.

In the same five-year period, Louisiana did improve its on-time graduation rate by 3 percent. Even so, only 59 percent of Louisiana’s 1990 high school graduates had completed high school in four years.

Students in 46 other states did better for on-time graduation.

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CHILD WELFARE STATISTICS FOR LOUISIANA

Louisiana's ranking among the 50 states and the District of Columbia in various aspects of child welfare, compiled in the Kids Count Data Book, a project of the Washington-based Center for the Study of Social Policy. The statistics are from 1990 unless otherwise specified.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Rate/No.</th>
<th>Ranking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of low birth-weight babies</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infant mortality per 1,000 live births</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>47</td>
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<tr>
<td>Death of children between ages 1-14 (per 100,000)</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>44</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent of all births that are to single teens</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>49</td>
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<tr>
<td>1991 arrests of children ages 10-17 for violent crimes (per 100,000)</td>
<td>493</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent graduating from high school</td>
<td>58.7</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent teens not in school and not in labor force (age 16-19)</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teen violent death ages 15-19 (per 100,000 teens)</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>49</td>
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<tr>
<td>1987-91 percent children in poverty</td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent children in single-parent families</td>
<td>31.9</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Kids Count Data Book

Children

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When measuring children in poverty, the study found that almost 34 percent of Louisiana's children lived in poverty from 1987 to 1991.

This was a 12 percent increase in Louisiana's childhood poverty rate since 1983 and a 28 percent increase since 1979, according to the study.

The study also calculated a "family risk index" for each state. This index measures "the proportion of families who begin with the odds stacked against them" because of teen-age pregnancy, poorly educated parents and/or illegitimacy, the study said.

"Of the 27,922 Louisiana families that began in 1990 with the birth of a first child, over half — or 15,250 new families — started out vulnerable for one or more of the following reasons: the mother had not finished high school, was a teen-ager or was single," the study said. All three risk factors were present for 4,622 of Louisiana's new families in 1990.

Between 1985 and 1990, the percentage of babies born to unmarried Louisiana teen-agers went up 19 percent, and the percentage of all Louisiana children living in single-parent families went up 29 percent. The state ranked 49th for both increases.

As has been reported previously, Louisiana has kept more of its babies alive in recent years. The state's infant mortality rate improved 7 percent between 1985 and 1990, the study noted.

However, the state saw a worsening picture in those same years for low birth-weights, which is often an indicator of poor maternal and infant health.

"The proportion of babies born low birth-weight increased by 6 percent," the study said.

"In 1990, over 6,600 Louisiana babies were born weighing less than 5.5 pounds. This translates to 9.2 percent of all babies born that year — only Mississippi and the District of Columbia had a higher proportion of low birth-weight babies."

"While the nation has made moderate improvements in the well-being of children, the conditions of teen-agers have become increasingly difficult and dangerous," it said.

This is the fourth installment of the Kids Count Data Book, which is published by the Center for the Study of Social Policy and the Annie E. Casey Foundation.