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Report points out Texas' high number of uninsured children

STATE BUDGET CUTS

are expected to cut into children's health plans, a prospect that worries some.

DALLAS (AP) - Texas is again No. 1 - in percentage of children without health insurance.

While a national report released Wednesday showed improvement for the state's children on several major indicators of well-being, the insurance ranking alarmed advocates for the poor.

"Without health insurance, children go without preventative care, they don't receive immunizations when they need them, and then when they have minor health problems, a thing like a cold can accelerate into a serious illness," said Dayna Finet, senior research associate at the Center for Public Policy Priorities, an Austin-based ad-

vocacy group.

Twenty-two percent of Texas children lack health insurance, compared with 12 percent nationally, according to the annual Kids Count report.

New Mexico, with 21 percent of children uninsured, ranks just behind Texas, followed by Louisiana and Arizona, both at 18 percent.

The report, sponsored by the Baltimore-based Annie E. Casey Foundation, compares states with one another and the nation as a whole in categories such as death rates, poverty and education.

Texas has a lower infant mortality rate than the nation but more children in poverty, more high school dropouts, a higher teen birth rate and a higher rate of teens killed by accident, homicide or suicide, according to the report.

State budget cuts expected to trim tens of thousands from the Children's Health Insur-

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Center for Public Policy Priorities

ance Program will only exacerbate Texas' problems, critics say.

"Here we are last in the country already, and then our Legislature cuts health insurance for low-income children even more," said Finet, the state's Kids Count director.

But spending more taxpayer money isn't the solution, some say.

Instead, Texas should reduce regulations that make health insurance in the state "incredibly expensive," said

Michael Quinn Sullivan, spokesman for the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a conservative think tank based in San Antonio.

"Right now, Texas' insurance regulatory environment requires everyone to purchase a Humvee when a lot of us only need a Honda Civic," Sullivan said.

Others point to the state's high immigrant population.

Many immigrants work at low-wage jobs that do not provide health insurance. Some who could afford insurance choose instead to send money to struggling relatives in their native country or save to start their own businesses or buy homes in the United States, as syndicated writer Linda Chavez noted in a 2000 column that defended then-Gov. George W. Bush against rival Al Gore's attacks.

The 14th annual Kids Count Data Book compared indicators

of child well-being from 2000, the most recent year for which state data were available, with 1990.

Texas showed improvements in infant mortality rate; child death rate; rate of teen deaths by accident, homicide and suicide; teen birth rate; percent of teens not attending school and not working; percent of children living with parents without full-time, year-round employment; and percent of children living in poverty.

However, the percent of low birth-weight babies rose, as did the percent of families with children headed by a single parent.

The state's high school dropout rate of 13 percent - unchanged from 1990 - was the nation's fourth worst, beating only Colorado, Nevada and Arizona.

And while Texas' teen birth rate fell, it still ranked 49th among the states, behind only Mississippi.

▼ Uninsured children in Texas, other states

States ranked by percent of children without health insurance, from worst to best, based on Kids Count report released Wednesday by the Annie E. Casey Foundation:

1. Texas, 22 percent;
2. New Mexico, 21 percent;
3. (tie) Arizona and Louisiana, 18 percent;
5. (tie) Montana and Nevada, 17 percent;
7. (tie) California, Florida, Idaho and Oklahoma, 16 percent;
11. Alaska, 15 percent;
12. Colorado, 14 percent;
13. (tie) South Carolina and Wyoming, 13 percent;

Source: Annie E. Casey Foundation

"Where you see a lower rate of teen pregnancy, you also see teenagers using contraception ... the right way," Finet said. "You see parents ... talking to their children about sexuality."