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Fewer Texas kids dropping out

But new report shows state teen birth rate, infant mortality remain high.

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Texas teenagers are increasingly staying in school or working, but teen girls here are still more likely than those in other states to have children, according to a national report being released today.

The Kids Count report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation also says the state's child poverty and infant mortality rates increased during the first half of the decade, and more children are living in single-parent families or families with no parent who is employed full time.

The Texas teen birth rate — 63 births per 1,000 females ages 15-19 — decreased 9 percent between 2000 and 2004 but remained the highest in the country.

Frances Deviney of the Center for Public Policy Priorities, which supports more spending on programs to help low-income Texans, said one reason for the high rate in Texas is that Hispanics, who make up about 35 percent of the state population, tend to have more teen mothers than other groups.

"Although Texas' teen birth rate has gone down in recent years, we obviously need to do much more," Deviney said. "If the University of Texas football team were at the bottom or near the bottom of the national rankings every year, there would be a public outcry."

She said that the falling number of high school dropouts reflects a focus on the issue by the state and by local groups and that Texas needs to put a similar focus on infant mortality and other problems.

"Most of the research shows that the infant mortality rate is linked to positive prenatal care and follow-up with the mother and child during that year postpartum, making sure they get proper medical care, proper nutrition and the support that parents need when they're going through a major life change such as having a baby for the first time," Deviney said.


The report also says 20 percent of Texas children were without health insurance in 2004, compared with a national rate of 11 percent. The Texas rate is the highest in the country.

Mary Katherine Stout of the Texas Public Policy Foundation, which pushes for less government spending, said she is skeptical about counting the uninsured because people go on and off public and private insurance rolls.

The number of children without insurance — 1.29 million in 2004, according to the Casey Foundation — was often cited as lawmakers debated this year whether to expand the Children's Health Insurance Program, which they ultimately did. But Stout said the way to make a dent in the number is through private programs.

"We need to look for ways to reduce government's involvement in this and bring in the free market ideas that promote competition, lower costs and better quality," Stout said.

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