

Part Two

Iowa Kids Count: 2003 In Review

When the Annie E. Casey Foundation annually releases its National Kids Count Data Book comparing the 50 states and the District of Columbia, Iowa usually ranks among the top five states. It should be no surprise, then, that Iowa generally has seen gradual improvement on most of its eight indicators of child well-being reported upon each year by Iowa Kids Count.

In fact, on six of the eight indicators of child well-being at the statewide level, there has been continued improvement over the last decade and a half. Iowa Kids Count's mortality indicators - infant mortality, child deaths and teen violent deaths - all have seen rate decreases in excess of 30 percent since 1990 (infant mortality - 30.1 percent, child deaths - 30.1 percent and teen violent deaths - 31.8 percent).

On other indicators, the rate for births to 16-17 year olds statewide has decreased 29.5 percent while the high school graduation rate has increased 8.0 percent during this same time period. Although the rate for teen unmarried births as a proportion of all births has increased 5.1 percent since 1990, it has decreased 14.6 percent since 1996.

While the news is good for these six indicators of child well-being, trends for the other two indicators have declined and are cause for concern. The percentage of babies in Iowa born at low birthweight has increased by 22.4 percent since 1990, while the rate of children with confirmed child abuse or neglect reports has increased 78.6 percent over the same period. One in 50 Iowa children had a confirmed child abuse or neglect report in 2003.

Iowa Kids Count also groups the counties in Iowa together by population size (see maps on page 25 for further analysis). Counties whose largest city has less than 5,000 people are in the rural category; counties whose largest city has a population of 5,000 to 49,999 are considered small urban; and counties with the largest city's population being 50,000 or more are metropolitan counties.

Generally speaking, rural counties fare better than small urban counties and small urban counties fare better than metropolitan counties on the eight indicators of child well-being. The infant mortality and child death rates for small urban counties, however, are lower than both rural and metropolitan counties.

In addition, the rates for teen violent deaths are a reverse of the general trend. Metropolitan counties have the lowest rates followed by small urban and then rural counties.

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More than 80 percent of deaths in this age group are the result of automobile accidents, which are more likely to occur on rural roads.

Altogether, the counties in Iowa showed improvement on about half of the indicators from 1990 to 2003. As might be expected, the indicators with a greater number of counties showing improvement during this time period were the indicators showing the most overall improvement themselves.

Infant mortality, births to 16-17 year olds and high school graduation all had at least two-thirds of the counties showing improvement

from 1990 to 2003. Conversely, low birthweight babies, teen unmarried births, and child abuse and neglect all had at least two-thirds of the counties experiencing deterioration during this time.

In 2003, less than one-half of the counties in each indicator had rates that were worse than the statewide figure. In fact, births to 16-17 year olds and high school graduation each had less than 30 counties with rates worse than the state average. On the other hand, low birthweight babies and teen unmarried births each had 44 counties with rates worse than Iowa's.

When compared to the rest of the nation, Iowa's quality of life makes it a good place to raise kids. For the most part, Iowa has been moving in the right direction on the major indicators of child well-being. These figures, however, need to be placed in the context of what Iowa could achieve for its children. There is room for substantial improvement on each of the eight indicators of child well-being tracked by Iowa Kids Count. Moreover, improvements are needed both for the children's own well-being and for society's need for an increasingly educated, healthy and productive future workforce.