



NEWS RELEASE

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New Report Shows Babies Are Off to a Better Start in Wisconsin: Milwaukee Improving but Still Struggling

A new online report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation once again confirms that despite encouraging trends, Milwaukee babies and mothers are at greater risk of adverse outcomes than children born in most other large American cities. According to this year's edition of *The Right Start for America's Newborns: City and State Trends*, the City of Milwaukee continues to rank below the national average on all eight indicators studied, while Wisconsin as a whole ranks above the national average in all but one of these indicators of child well being.

"The improvement in outcomes for babies in Milwaukee is certainly encouraging," said Charity Eleson, executive director of the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families. "However, we still must address the enormous disparity between babies born to Milwaukee families and babies born to families in the rest of the state".

The eight indicators used in the *Right Start* are significantly influenced by family income. According to the 2000 Census, 32 percent of Milwaukee children are poor, compared to only 11 percent statewide. For minority children in Milwaukee, the numbers are staggering. Forty-three percent of African American children and 33 percent of Hispanic children are living in families that are poor.

"Racial and economic disparity in Wisconsin are incredibly persistent," Eleson said. "We need to find better ways to close the opportunity gap that is putting Milwaukee kids at a disadvantage from the day they are born, and in many cases even earlier."

Research in early learning indicates that children's readiness for school is closely linked to their opportunities for quality experiences and to their physical health. Conditions before, at, and after birth have direct connections to children's health and well being in the early years. "A lot of people are quick to blame public schools for the poor performance of disadvantaged kids. They are missing the point; the problem starts--as do the most promising solutions--long before a child ever sets foot in kindergarten," Eleson said.

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The report includes the following highlights and lowlights:

Births to teens–

Teenage childbearing can negatively affect both child and mother. Babies born to adolescents are more likely to be born low-birthweight and to receive less cognitive stimulation than are babies born to adult women. Teen mothers are also half as likely to get timely prenatal care as adult mothers. Although the rate of births to teens in Milwaukee has improved over the decade, Milwaukee ranks 49th of the 50 largest cities in rate of births to teens. The city fairs a little better in the rate of repeat births (25%) suggesting that teen mothers are waiting before having a second child.

Births to mothers with less than 12 years of education –

Mother's education level can affect many aspects of child well-being, including school readiness and the child's overall educational achievement. Children of more highly educated mothers are more likely to attend an early childhood program than other children and more likely to be read to daily by a family member. Nationally, only 38 percent of children whose mothers did not complete high school attended an early childhood program, compared to 70 percent of children whose mothers had completed college. Reading to young children promotes language acquisition and literacy development crucial to success upon school entry. Less than half (42%) of all preschool aged children whose mothers have less than a high school diploma were read to daily by a family member, compared to 73 percent of preschoolers whose mothers were college graduates. The percentage of births to mothers without a high school education in Wisconsin (16.4%) is well below the national average (22%). In Milwaukee, however, fully 35% of births are to women without 12 years of education.

Smoking – Babies born to mothers that smoked during pregnancy are more likely to have health problems, including low birthweight, intrauterine growth, cognitive and developmental delays, infant mortality and a host of other negative consequences. Although there has been great improvement, 16 percent of all births in Wisconsin in 2001 were to women who smoked. Nationally, that figure is 12%.

Prenatal care – Women who receive timely prenatal care are less likely to have babies with health problems. According to Child Trends, failure to obtain early prenatal care may reflect a mother's indifference to her pregnancy, or it may reflect a lack of available health care. It may also reflect the fact that a woman is in a precarious situation where other resources are not available to her and her child. In Wisconsin 97 percent of mothers received care in the first trimester of their pregnancy. However, only 65 percent of mothers with less than a high school education received early care.

Low-birthweight (less than 5.5 lbs) – Babies that are born weighing less than 5.5 pounds have a good chance of experiencing developmental and health problems as they grow up. The number of babies born at low birthweight may be an indication of a group of children that will need additional assistance as they prepare for school. The percent of babies born at low birthweight in Milwaukee in 2001 was 9.6 percent (the national 50-city average was 8.8 %). For the state of Wisconsin that rate was 6.6 percent.

The Right Start is a joint project of KIDS COUNT--an initiative of The Annie E. Casey Foundation, located in Baltimore, MD--and Child Trends, a Washington, DC-based research organization.

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The report is available at <http://www.aecf.org/kidscount/rightstart2004>. The online format allows viewers to create custom reports such as state and city profiles, line graphs showing trends over time, color-coded U.S. maps, and ranking tables, all generated from *The Right Start* database.

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