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Maternal and Child Well Being in Wisconsin Reported *Right Start Report Looks at Wisconsin and Milwaukee*

Madison – Wisconsin as a whole continues to perform above the national average on measures of maternal and child well being but Milwaukee continues to struggle. 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 six of eight indicators studied, while Wisconsin as a whole ranks above the national average in all but one of these indicators of child well being.

"Poverty continues to be the strongest factor determining poor health outcomes for children. The rate of growth in the number of individuals living in poverty was the highest in Wisconsin out of all 50 states in 2004. Poverty directly affects birth weights, prenatal care, health care coverage and healthy outcomes for children," said Charity Eleson, Executive Director for Wisconsin Council on Children and Families.

All eight indicators used in the *Right Start* are significantly influenced by family income. According to 2004 census data, 41 percent of Milwaukee children are poor, compared to 14 percent statewide.

"Certainly one-way to assure that conditions for families in Milwaukee continue to improve is to maintain and expand health care coverage for families. Continued state support for medical assistance, family planning funding, and legislative support for the proposed 'every child covered' BadgerCare Plus plan would help improve these numbers," Eleson said.

The 2005 report includes the following highlights and lowlights:

Births to teens– Teenage childbearing can negatively affect both the child and mother. Babies born to adolescents are more likely to be born with low birth weights 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 44th of the 50 largest cities. **In addition, 24 percent of births to teens in 2003 were to young women with at least one other child already.**

Births to unmarried mothers – Children born to unmarried mothers generally do not have access to the same economic and emotional resources that are available to children born to married women. In Milwaukee 60 percent of babies were born to unmarried mothers in 2003. **This is twice the state rate of 30 percent and significantly higher than the 50-city average of 44 percent.**

Births to mothers with less than 12 years of education – A 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 be read to daily by a family member. Reading to young children promotes language acquisition and literacy development crucial to success upon school entry. Less than half (42 percent) 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. **In 2003, the percentage of births to mothers without a high school education in Wisconsin (15.6 percent) was well below the national average**

(21.6 percent). In Milwaukee, however, fully 34 percent of births were to women without 12 years of education while the national big city average was 28 percent.

Smoking – Babies born to mothers that smoked during pregnancy are more likely to have health problems, including low birth weight, cognitive and developmental delays, infant mortality and a host of other negative consequences. **Although there has been great improvement, 14 percent of all births in Wisconsin in 2003 were to women who smoked. Nationally, that figure is 11 percent. In Milwaukee 12 percent of mothers smoked during pregnancy – the only indicator in which Milwaukee’s rate is better than the state as a whole.**

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 2003, 3 percent of Wisconsin mothers received late or no care during pregnancy.**

Low birth weight (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 birth weight 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 birth weight in Milwaukee in 2003 was 9.8 percent (the national 50-city average was 8.9 percent). For the state of Wisconsin, that rate was 6.8 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. The measures tracked in The Right Start are intended to provide policymakers, child advocates and others with data that reflect conditions prior to birth; a newborn’s health status at birth; and maternal characteristics that are associated with a child’s educational and social outcomes.

The report is available at <http://www.aecf.org/kidscount/sld/rightstart.jsp> (ctrl and click). 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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