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Children's health improving

■ Rhode Island has the second best rate of prenatal care in the nation, according to KIDS COUNT.

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The health safety net for Rhode Island's children showed improvement, but the number of children living below the poverty level increased based on statistics for 2007 and monitored by Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, a children's advocacy group.

"Children's health outcomes continue to improve," said Elizabeth Burke Bryant, executive director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT.

There is still room for improvement in other areas, however. The number of children living below the poverty line, for example, shows a decline in children's welfare.

These are just two of several statistics that KIDS COUNT uses to track the status of Rhode Island's children in its 15th annual fact book, released this morning at a press conference in Warwick. The book tracks different indicators in the areas of family and community, economic well being, health, safety and education, to provide a snapshot of children's welfare in Rhode Island.

Most of the indicators revolve

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around family income.

"We've really focused, as we always do, on kids living below the poverty line," Bryant said.

Around 40,000 children in 2007, or 17.5 percent,

lived below the poverty line in Rhode Island, which Bryant said is \$16,700 for a family of three. That is up from the 2006 level of 15 percent.

Slightly less than half of those 40,000 children, or 44 percent, live in extreme poverty, which is half the poverty limit, she said.

A new indicator included this year is health and housing, and Bryant said the purpose was to demonstrate how substandard housing conditions affect health and safety. An older home may have unsafe wiring, poor ventilation, or a faulty heating system. The presence of roaches or rodents may contribute to asthma, she said.

Among the positive indicators for this year is the dwindling number of pregnant women who get delayed prenatal care.

Rhode Island has the second-best rate of prenatal care in the nation, Bryant said. In the entire state, 12.1 percent of pregnant women received delayed care, and only 11.1 percent in Westerly. Figures were not available for Charlestown, Hopkinton and Richmond.

Although single-year figures were not provided in the fact book for this area, Bryant noted that the teen death rate is declining.

"These indicators are moving in the right direction," she said.

The number of children in poverty is one of several economic indicators tracked by KIDS COUNT. Data from 2007 indicate it varies widely by race. According to the

fact book, poverty affects 12 percent of white children, 26 percent of black children, 29 percent of Asian children, and 42 percent of Hispanic children.

Recent data was not available for the individual towns for this indicator.

The four local towns generally, but not completely, had more positive indicators than the state as a whole. Among the highlights in the 2008 data: Westerly had 100 percent of students enrolled in all-day kindergarten, compared to 58 percent statewide; Charlestown had no infants born at highest risk, compared to 5 percent statewide; the teen birth rate in Hopkinton was 6.9 per 1,000 teens, versus 19.1 per 1,000 teens around the state; and 1.7 per 1,000 Richmond children were hospitalized with asthma, versus 4.0 children per 1,000 statewide.

Among the areas where the local towns lag behind the rest of the state: Westerly's infant mortality rate is 8.3 infants per 1,000, versus 6.3 infants per 1,000 statewide; 9.2 percent of Charlestown's children have an elevated lead level in their bloodstream, while only 4.5 percent of children in the state have that problem; only 55 percent of eligible Hopkinton children receive food stamps, versus 77 percent statewide; and 10 percent of Richmond's children are born at highest risk, compared to 5 percent in the rest of Rhode Island.

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