

# Alarming statistics

By **Ashley Walker (Contact)**

It looks AS IF Kansas legislative candidates have another important question to answer before Election Day: What is your plan to improve the health and wellness of our state's youngest residents?

According to the recently released 2010 Kids Count Data Book, a state-by-state study on the well-being of children in the United States, Kansas is doing slightly better in some areas, but we have some serious work to do in others.

Ranked 13th in the nation overall, since 2000, Kansas continues to rank in the top 10 nationally on four indicators:

- Fifth in the percentage of teens not in school and not working.
- Seventh in the percentage of children without secure parental employment.
- Ninth in the percentage of children in single-parent families.
- Tenth in the percentage of teens who were not attending school and were not high school graduates.

That's not too bad. But that's also not the whole story.

As the national infant mortality rate was falling between 2000 and 2007, it was rising in Kansas, from 6.8 to 7.9 percent. As a result, Kansas plummeted from a ranking of 29 to a miserable ranking of 40 when it comes to the death rate of our state's babies. In 2007, 333 infants died in Kansas. With the exception of Oklahoma, whose infant mortality rate is slightly higher, Kansas' infant mortality rate exceeds all our neighboring states.

And that's still not the whole story.

According to the Data Book, the child poverty rate in Kansas is also getting worse. In 2008, 15 percent (about 100,000), of Kansas children were living in poverty, a 25 percent increase (20,000 more children) since 2000. And given the fact that the impact of the recession since 2008 hasn't been calculated, the numbers are likely to be even higher today.

To make matters worse, according to the president and CEO of Kansas Action for Children, Shannon Cotsordis, the Kansas health leaders still haven't determined a cause for the alarming statistics.

It seems to make sense that a higher rate of child poverty in Kansas and more families who are unable to afford or access proper prenatal care, may contribute to the high infant mortality rate in the state. But the cycle of poverty doesn't stop there. Children who are raised in poverty continue to be at a significant disadvantage when it comes to their health, education and development as they grow up.

The implications of these startling statistics for our state's future doesn't seem promising.

Something's not right here. Children born in Kansas deserve a stronger start. As new officials are elected this fall, on both the local and state levels, Kansas policymakers cannot ignore these alarming statistics.

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