

Work to Improve Conditions for Children

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Most people share the view that children are our future. The United Nations' secretary general said at the 2001 World Summit of Children that "We were all children once. And we all share the desire for the well-being of our children, which has always been and will continue to be the most universally cherished aspiration of humankind."

However, we rarely take time to examine the conditions in which children live. Here are some of the key characteristics of Alabama children, focusing on their socio-demographic and health profiles. Overall, the number of children has not changed much in the last 10 years. But, socio-economic and health indicators show a mixed picture.

According to the 2010 census data, there were 1,276,312 children (age 19 and younger) in Alabama. Compared to the 2000 census data, the number of persons below age 20 has increased only by 1.6 percent in the last decade, whereas that of people 20 years and older increased by 9.8 percent. In 2000, persons age 19 and younger represented 28.3 percent of the total state population. That figure has gone down to 26.7 percent in 2010. Clearly, we are having fewer children now than we did 10 years ago.

What are the living conditions of today's children in Alabama?

Let's begin at birth. More than half of births to new mothers in 2009 were unintended, according to the Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System (PRAMS), a surveillance program of new mothers funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Among teens that figure was 71.2 percent, or 7 in 10 births. One important contributing factor is teen sexual activity.

Data from high school students interviewed in the 2009 Youth Risk Behavior Survey show that, compared to U.S. teens, Alabama teens had sexual intercourse at a younger age: 10.1 percent of Alabama teens and 5.9 percent of U.S. teens had sex before age 13. Alabama teens were also more likely to have sexual intercourse with four or more sexual partners than U.S. teens. Nonetheless, compared to U.S. teens, Alabama teens had a lower percent of nonmarital births.

Still, such higher levels of unintended births are alarming because unplanned childbearing is usually associated with poor health outcomes. For example, 10.6 percent of children born in Alabama in 2008 were of low birth-weight compared to 8.2 percent for the nation. Alabama babies also have a higher infant mortality rate than U.S. babies (9.5 versus 6.8 per 1,000).

Other factors such as poverty and low educational attainment contribute to these undesirable health outcomes. Thus, in 2009, one in four Alabama children age 17 and younger were living in poverty compared to one in five U.S. children of the same age. Overall, Alabama ranked seventh among the 50 states and the District of Columbia in percent of children in poverty.

Alabama children also drop out of school at a higher rate than U.S. children. In 2009, the percent of teens 16-19 years old who were not enrolled in high school and who were not high school graduates was seven and six, respectively for Alabama and United States.

There is some encouraging news in terms of drug use and cigarette smoking. According to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey data, there has been a decline in the percent of Alabama high school students who used marijuana one or more times during their lifetime (from 38.7 percent in 2001 to 31.3 percent in 2009). Similarly, the percent of high school students who smoked a whole cigarette before age 13 has declined from 22.4 in 2001 to 14.8 in 2009.

Unfortunately, some of these risky behaviors occur more frequently in school now than before. According to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey data, the percent of high school students who had one or more drinks of alcohol on school property one or more times during the 30 days preceding the survey increased from 3.3 in 2001 to 5.4 in 2009. In the same way, the percent of high school students who have used marijuana on school property one or more times during the 30 days preceding the survey rose from 3.0 in 2001 to 4.6 in 2009.

This profile of Alabama children calls for concerted efforts of parents, educators, private and public agencies, and local and state governments to re-examine the conditions in which young people live. Neglected children will become a burden to all.

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