

Report calls city 'high risk' for health of moms, infants

By Tarryl Jackson

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The number of babies born pre-term and to unwed mothers and black teens in Jackson jumped during the past decade, according to a statewide report released today.

The Right Start in Michigan report, produced by the Michigan League for Human Services, measured maternal and infant health from 2000 to 2008 for 69 Michigan communities. It declared Jackson one of 13 that are "high risk."

Of 934 births to mothers who lived in Jackson in 2008, Medicaid paid for 64 percent. Medicaid typically covers the cost of prenatal care and delivery for pregnant women without health insurance and in households with income below 185 percent of the federal poverty level.

The number of families who qualify for Medicaid is troubling, said Jane Zehnder-Merrell, director of the Kids Count project for the Michigan League for Human Services.

"It's very much of a concern when we see data that shows a large segment of children who are at risk," she said.

The report also found Jackson's new mothers in 2008 were more likely to be unmarried and to deliver their child pre-term than they were in 2000.

There was some good news. The rate of teen births declined by 15 percent in Jackson between 2000 and 2008, compared to a decline of 10 percent for Michigan.

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By the numbers

Highlights for Jackson from the Right Start for Michigan report:

597 — Number of live births (out of 934 total) paid for by Medicaid in 2008.

18.2 — Percent of live births to teens in 2008, down from 21.4 percent in 2000.

61.3 — Percent of live births to unwed mothers in 2008, up from 56 percent in 2000.

11.3 — Percent of live births that were pre-term in 2008, up from 10.5 percent in 2000.

For more on the Right Start report, go to the Michigan League of Human Services website, www.milhs.org.

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The percentage of live births to white teens decreased from 19.8 percent in 2000 to 14.9 percent in 2008. However, the percentage of live births to black teens increased from 27.7 percent to 30.9 percent during the same period.

"To have that big of a disparity between the two groups is concerning," said Sheri Butters, director of the Jackson County Great Start Collaborative, which focuses on early childhood learning.

Of all live births in Jackson in 2008, about one-fourth were to mothers with no high

school diploma or GED, and 33.1 percent were to mothers who smoked during pregnancy.

The state's investment in maternal and infant health has fallen during the past several years, according to the report.

Funding for family, maternal and child health was cut in half — from \$60 million to \$30 million — between fiscal years 2002 and 2010, according to the report.

The report also stated that payments to Michigan providers who serve low-income children and pregnant women were cut by 8 percent during the past two fiscal years.