Report: Teen births down 15 percent in Kalamazoo
City saw drops across racial/ethnic lines, but more progress needed

LANSING – Far fewer Kalamazoo teens are having babies than last decade thanks to concentrated efforts at the state and community level, according to a new report released today.

In its latest Right Start policy report, “Teen births in Michigan, its cities and townships: We cannot afford to slow down progress,” the Michigan League for Public Policy shows that Kalamazoo saw a 15 percent drop in teen births, with 11 percent of the area’s births in 2011-13 to youths under age 20 compared to 13 percent in 2004-06. Teen births statewide dropped 18 percent over the same trend period. The declines reached across racial and ethnic lines, with fewer births to white, African-American and Hispanic teens.

Overall, efforts during the past 20 years have led to a 40 percent reduction in Michigan’s teen births, but the annual state and national teen birth rates remain among the highest of any industrialized country and significant disparities persist in low-income communities and communities of color.

The report highlights strides made to reduce teen births since 1992 with changes in public policy, funding for evidence-based and results-driven programs, sex education and access to birth control and healthcare. Michigan’s overall annual teen birth rate of 24 births per 1,000 was below the national average of 27 teen births per 1,000 in 2013, and had dropped from 13 percent in 1992 to 7 percent of all births in 2013. Still, American teens are more than twice as likely to have a baby as those in Canada, four times more likely than teens in Germany or Norway and almost 10 times more likely than teens in Switzerland.

“We have far fewer babies born to teen moms today in Kalamazoo and statewide, and we should be thrilled with this progress, but we must not slow our efforts,” said Alicia Guevara Warren, Kids Count in Michigan Project Director at the Michigan League for Public Policy. “We still have too many babies born to teen moms—an average of 135 in Kalamazoo and 8,897 in Michigan over the last three years—and those babies are more likely to live in poverty, struggle academically and suffer from health issues.”

Research shows that teen childbearing has a lifelong impact on both mother and child, along with the state’s economy. Most teen moms do not complete high school, live in poverty, and raise a child alone, making it more difficult to ensure that their children are ready and prepared for school. Children living in poverty also are more susceptible to decreased health outcomes and are at higher risk for abuse and neglect. Michigan taxpayers also bear the cost of teen childbearing at approximately $283 million in 2010, according to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. On the positive side, the decline in teen births between 1991 and 2010 saved state taxpayers almost half a billion dollars in 2010 alone.
Of particular concern are persistent racial and ethnic disparities with African-American and Hispanic teens having much higher percentages of births and repeat births before age 20 than white teens. While Kalamazoo saw declines in each racial and ethnic group, 6 percent of births were to white teens, 20 percent were to African-Americans and 13 percent were to Hispanic teens. The city was also among the top ten highest percentages of teen births in the state for African-American teens. Statewide, white teens had the highest number of teen births, with an average of 4,440 compared to 3,310 for African-American teens and 952 for Hispanic teens between 2011 and 2013.

Teen pregnancy also disproportionately impacts low-income communities. Of the 69 major population centers in Michigan examined, those in wealthy suburban communities in Oakland, Ottawa and Macomb had the smallest percentages of teen births. However, the communities with the largest percentages of teen births were concentrated in central cities in eight counties across Michigan’s lower half, including Battle Creek, Port Huron, Muskegon, Flint/Flint Township, Jackson, Pontiac, Saginaw, Detroit and Highland Park.

The report details a number of recommendations for policymakers, healthcare providers, communities, schools, parents and caregivers to improve policy and practices, including:

- Supporting funding for evidence-based, results-driven programming to prevent teen pregnancies.
- Targeting resources specifically for youth in foster care and the juvenile justice system, who have higher than average rates of pregnancy.
- Increasing the availability of birth control and ensuring access to affordable contraception.
- Expanding early childhood services, including home visitation programs.
- Promoting youth development programs and supporting programs for at-risk teens.

“There are so many ways that we as a state, community and family can effectively and economically reduce the chances of teen pregnancy and the negative consequences it brings to all of us, including the parents and children who bear the most of it,” Guevara Warren said. “Teen pregnancy is preventable, and with continued and concentrated efforts, we should see even greater results in another 20 years.”

In addition to the full report, individual profiles of 20 communities can be found at www.mlpp.org/kids-count/michigan-2/2015-right-start. For more information on the League’s Kids Count work, go to www.mlpp.org/kids-count.

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The Michigan League for Public Policy, www.mlpp.org, is a nonprofit policy institute focused on economic opportunity for all. It is the only state-level organization that addresses poverty in a comprehensive way. Right Start is a product of Kids Count in Michigan, a project of the League.