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PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

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Officials hope report is a wake-up call

 By [Maggi Newhouse](#)
 TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Wednesday, June 9, 2004

Penn Hills High School senior Sherelle Weaver got pregnant at 17 and didn't go to a doctor until her fifth or sixth month of pregnancy, after learning she was at risk of having a low-weight baby.

About 15 percent of Pennsylvania's children are born without having had early prenatal care; 9 percent are born to mothers under age 20; and more than a third of the state's children live below the poverty line, according to a report being released today by Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, a Harrisburg nonprofit.

"We hope this report can serve as a wake-up call," said Partnerships Executive Director Joan Benso. "There's a need to not only look beyond our own community, but we need to look in our own communities at the kids and families that need our help."

The 2004 "State of the Child in Pennsylvania" report shows that about one in three children are born to parents in low-income families in Allegheny, Beaver, Washington and Westmoreland counties. In Butler County, the number is about one in four. In some of Pennsylvania's most rural areas, including Greene and Fayette counties, half of the children come from low-income families.

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"It's very easy to sit in our communities and believe that low-income kids live somewhere else," Benso said. "The truth is that these kids aren't just children of color in our urban centers. Some of the highest numbers are in our rural communities."

Research from the National Academy of Sciences suggests that poverty impedes a child's reading for school more than any other factor, Benso said.

Poverty and other indicators detailed in the report might explain why nearly half of all fifth-graders in the state aren't reading or doing math at grade level, Benso said.

There are other intangible effects that a parent's income can have on a child, said Timothy P. Snyder, executive director of the Parental Stress Center.

The center, based in East Liberty, offers parents and children a wide range of programs designed to strengthen family life.

Poverty "creates a loss of hope, forlornness and despondency in parents who figure that they can overcome their challenges," Snyder said. "Clearly, it directly impacts a child, and the only way to really protect the very young children is to support the families."

The report details about two dozen indicators. Children who fit in one at-risk category often tend to fit into others, said Dr. Mary Carrasco, a pediatrician at Mercy Hospital, Uptown.

For example, a younger mother without a high school diploma or a woman who smokes during pregnancy might be less likely to seek early prenatal care.

During her pregnancy, Weaver, the Penn Hills High School senior, heard about Healthy Start, a nonprofit group that works with parents to reduce infant mortality and low birth weights.

Stacy Childs, a Health Start caseworker, visited Weaver several times a month and offered guidance on how to take care of herself during the pregnancy.

Weaver, now 18, gave birth to daughter Angel nine months ago. Weaver will graduate Thursday and plans to attend community college in the fall.

Angel weighed 5 pounds, 15 ounces at birth, six ounces above what would be considered a low birth weight.

"It turned out good," Weaver said. "I think it was from Healthy Start. I don't think she would have been cool if I wouldn't have gotten the help."

Healthy Start Executive Director Cheryl Spire Flint said based on the program's success in Allegheny County, it has been expanded to Fayette County.

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