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**MORE STATE CHILDREN NEED RIGHT START FOR SCHOOL SUCCESS
Advocate Says Right Ending to School is Key to Right Start**

JACKSON – No state had a higher percentage of infants born in 2002 at increased risk for the developmental delays that effect a child’s readiness for school than Mississippi, according to updated KIDS COUNT Right Start data. Over 17 percent of all infants born in the State were preterm and over 11 percent were low-birthweight. With the District of Columbia included, the State ranked 51 for preterm births and 50 for the percentage born at low-birthweight.

Nationwide the average percentage of preterm births increased from 10.6 in 1990 to 12.1 in 2002 while the average percentage of low-birthweight births had a smaller increase for the same period (7.0% - 7.8%).

Preterm births in Mississippi increased from 15.1 percent to 17.2 percent during this period, following the national trend. However, the percentage of low-birthweight births in the State increased from under 10 percent (9.6) to 11.2, unlike the smaller national average increase.

“What really jumps off the page when you look at the trend data is how closely Mississippi follows the ups and downs of the nation,” said Jane Boykin, Project Director of KIDS COUNT Mississippi and President of the Forum on Children & Families. The graph paints a clear picture of the gap that sets Mississippi apart and lands us on the bottom of ranked lists of states,” she continued.

Boykin said the State’s high percentage of low-birthweight and pre-term births is the result of preventable circumstances. The upward trend is nationwide and, in her opinion, largely attributable to better medical care. “It’s not the increase that’s disturbing,” she said, “it’s how much trouble we’ve been in all along because of the number of our births to mothers in their teens. “We’ve got a lock on last place unless we take a different approach.”

When asked what that approach might be, Boykin suggested free tuition to a post-high school job training program or two-year college for boys and girls who graduate from high school without becoming a parent.

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“You can’t print what I’d suggest for older men who are responsible for a birth to a teen mother,” she said, “but it’s more than just socially acceptable to give our children hope for a better future. Research has consistently proven children with goals for their adult life are less likely to begin parenting too soon.”

“Mississippi’s taxpayers,” she concluded, “can send children to college for a whole lot less money than the State is currently spending on births to teens. Mississippi would save a lot of money and a lot of heartache by giving newborns the right start for school success and the right start for a successful adult life.”

KIDS COUNT is a national initiative of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a data-driven, private charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantage children, families, and communities in the United States. KIDS COUNT Mississippi is an affiliated project of the Mississippi Forum on Children & Families.

The updated birth data report for all states and the nation’s 50 largest cities is available at www.aecf.org/kidscount/rightstart2005. For data on Mississippi counties and a link to the national data report, visit www.mfcf/kidscount/rightstart2005.

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