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N.C. Health Report Links Rising Poverty To Negative Health

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RALEIGH, N.C. -- Too many of North Carolina's children enter the world too small and are growing up too heavy, according to an annual report being released Tuesday.

The N.C. Child Health Report Card, which examines health trends among the more than 2 million children in the state, also attributed several negative trends to a rising child poverty rate that reached 21.3 percent last year.

"The poverty rate continues to go up, and that gets reflected in many of the indicators," said Tom Vitaglione, a senior fellow at the child advocacy group Action for Children North Carolina, which helped assemble the report with the N.C. Institute of Medicine.

As employer health insurance erodes, the percentage of uninsured children has grown to nearly 12 percent, despite a 45 percent increase in the number of children covered by government-funded health insurance between 2000 and 2005, the report said.

The percentage of low-birth infants -- those weighing 5.5 pounds or less -- rose from 8.8 percent of newborns in 2000 to 9.3 percent in 2005. The percentage among nonwhite births reached 13.7 percent last year. Low-birth weight is a factor in infant mortality and developmental delays, the report said.

The report, compiled from federal and state data, found that 24.5 percent of low-income children ages 5-11 were identified as overweight in 2005 compared to 20.6 percent five years earlier. A failing grade also was given to the percentage of children ages 12-18 who are overweight, which has increased from 26 percent to 27.3 percent.

State agencies are attempting to tackle obesity through child fitness initiatives. Also, the General Assembly since 2005 has approved laws seeking to improve school lunch offerings, increase daily physical activity at school and curb or ban sales of sugared soft drinks.

Vitaglione said complex cultural issues linked to weight may mean reforms could take a long time to translate into small numbers on the scales: "It won't be fixed by one thing, like a vaccine," he said.

While the percentage of older children who smoked cigarettes in the past 30 days has declined from 27.8 percent in 2001 to 20.3 percent in 2005, the report gave failing grades to marijuana and alcohol use, which rose slightly within the same period.

The report also found more positive trends, such as improving rates for lead testing among children, continued high immunization rates and a reduced number of communicable diseases such as HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis.

The overall child fatality rate has dropped from 81 deaths per 100,000 children in 2000 to 76.9 percent in 2005. But the report gave failing grades to deaths by homicide, which rose from 57 overall in 2000 to 78 in 2005, and from guns, which increased from 47 to 61 for the same period.

Dental treatment rates also are improving but still have a long way to go, the report's authors said.

[N.C. Child Health Report Card](#)

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