



Are Montana Roads Becoming Safer?

Traffic Safety and Other Findings from Montana Kids Count

by Thale Dillon

Montana has made great inroads in the number of motor vehicle crashes involving drivers who are under 18 over the past several years. Not only has this rate decreased by an impressive 27 percent since 2000, but accidents involving drivers under 18 are constituting a smaller portion of the total number of motor vehicle accidents in the state as well (at 13 percent in 2007, down from 17 percent in 2000).

According to preliminary estimates by analysts at the State Highway Traffic Safety Office, fewer children are being killed in auto accidents as well. Decreases in the 0-to-14 age group are attributed to more people in the state becoming trained as safety seat technicians, teaching the proper use of child restraints and booster seats at fitting stations around the state, where they educate the public how to select the right seat as well as correct installation and use. (See related article, pages 15-19.)

Though its a little too early to determine a definite trend, the state may also be seeing a downward trend in the 15 to 17-year-old group over the last two years. This development is likely due to the introduction of a Graduated Driver License law for young drivers, which the Legislature passed during the 2007 session.

These insights into children's safety on the state's roads and highways are, along with several other child-related themes, detailed in the 2008 Montana Kids Count data book, which was released in November. The book is a statistical summary of the well-being of children and vulnerable families in the state. The book provides insight into conditions both at the state and county levels. Some of the major themes highlighted in the book are summarized below.

Population

As in years past, Montana's population grew in 2007, reaching close to 958,000, an increase of 6 percent from 2000. This state-level growth does, however, mask a more complex

picture. Thirty-four of Montana's 56 counties experienced population declines over the past eight years, and in 11 of these, the percentage population decrease reached double digits. All 11 counties are located in eastern Montana. Only counties with an urban center saw significant population increases, and only five of them – primarily located in the western part of the state – experienced percentage increases in the double digits. Yellowstone County (in which Billings, the state's largest city, is located) saw a relatively low population increase for a metropolitan area, at just over 8 percent, compared to Gallatin County, the state's biggest gainer, at close to 29 percent.

A second facet to the state's population growth is that the total child population is shrinking, while the number of young children is on an upward trend. The number of children under 18 went from 228,400 in 2000 to 219,500 in 2007, a 4 percent decline, while the number of children under 5 went from 54,600 to 59,100 over the same period, an increase of more than 8 percent. This would indicate a cyclical pattern resulting in the state's natural growth leveling off over the next few decades before again picking up as the under-5 cohort reaches adulthood. Another interesting point to note is that the total number of white and American Indian children under 18 went down, while the number of Hispanic/Latino children actually increased.

But still there is more to the population story. In all counties with double-digit percentage population declines, there also have been reductions in the numbers of children under 5. This decline indicates that the downward trend will continue in these counties, as there is increasingly less "new blood." The median age in these counties is well above that of the state and even farther above that of the counties with increasing populations. In the counties with the highest population growth, the number of children under 5 has increased considerably, with the largest increase taking place in Flathead County (up 28 percent).

**Table 1
Median Ages,
Montana**

Median Ages	
Montana	43
Daniels	52
Sheridan	51
Treasure	47
Flathead	40
Gallatin	32
Jefferson	43
Missoula	35
Ravalli	43

Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

In terms of vital statistics, the number of births to Montana residents is on an upward trend, along with the birth rate (up 9 percent and 5 percent, respectively), which adds to the cyclical pattern detected in the growth of the under-5 group. On the flip side, infant deaths and the infant mortality rate are up, by 13 and 4 percent, respectively. Child deaths, however, are down by 33 percent, while the child death rate is down by 48 percent.

School/Education

School enrollment at all grade levels continues to be down, although pre-kindergarten enrollment is actually even with 2000. With the increases in the under-5 cohort, we can expect to see increased enrollment in this area in the coming years.

Looking at the proficiency gap between white and American Indian students, there is no clear trend when considering 4th grade reading proficiency levels. However, looking at 8th grade proficiency levels, the gap between the two groups has been narrowing over the past three years. Still, there is little change in the percentage of the two populations 25 and older with a bachelor's degree or higher—the gap of almost 20 percentage points between whites and American Indians has remained fairly constant since 2000.

Youth Risk Behavior

Data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, conducted by the Montana Office of Public Instruction, indicate that Montana youth's involvement in risky behavior is on a downward trend. Smoking has seen the greatest reduction since 2001, down 30 percent for all youth, while non-use of seat belts is down by 28 percent, and drinking and driving is down by 27 percent.

While there are reductions in all areas of surveyed risk behavior, the reduction is smaller for American Indian youth. Only in the area of suicide attempts was the reduction close to the same for the two groups: For all youth the rate was

down 24 percent, while it was down by 23 percent for Indian youth. This, however, masks the fact that Indian youth start out with rates of attempted suicide that are twice as high as for the total youth population. In 2007, the rates were 7.9 percent for all youth and 15.8 percent for Indian youth.

Poverty

Over the past eight years, the number of children living below 200 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL) has gone from 49 to 42 percent of all children. While this may, on the surface, seem like a positive development, these statistics hide the fact that the number of children living below 100 percent of the federal poverty level is virtually even with 2000, that the number of children living in extreme poverty (50 percent FPL) has gone from 4 to 7 percent, and that children under 5 living below poverty has gone from 17 to 21 percent. In essence, while there are fewer poor people in Montana today than there were eight years ago, those that are still poor are worse off than they were at the turn of the century, and children and single-parent families make up a growing share of the poor population.



Miscellaneous

The rates of children being fully immunized by their second birthdays are down, sometimes dramatically, in almost all Montana counties (42 out of 56). The primary reason for this is twofold:

1. The definition of “fully immunized” is evolving continually, making the target number of inoculations something of a moving target as it comes to include an increasing number of inoculations. Most recently, three doses of Hepatitis B was added to the series.
2. Parents are putting off the vaccinations, or spreading them out more, effectively postponing children being “fully immunized” until they enter kindergarten.

Number of juvenile offenses is on a downward trend (-13 percent since 2000), as is the juvenile arrest rate (-21 percent since 2000). However, drug and violent offenses are increasing as portions of total offenses (up 13 percent and 9 percent, respectively).

American Indian Child and Maternal Health

Data are vital to addressing public health problems in all populations. When data are lacking, it becomes impossible to assess the magnitude of a problem, as well as to measure any changes, for the worse or for the better, within the population.

While it has long been assumed that all American Indian people face the same sets of problems, there has recently been more attention paid to the difference, not just between American Indian and white populations, but among American populations of various tribes and on different reservations.

In Montana and Wyoming, the tribes themselves, through the efforts of the Rocky Mountain Tribal Epidemiology Center in Billings, are taking an active role in acquiring the necessary data to address discrepancies in birth and child outcomes within American Indian populations. Though moving forward by small steps, the important first step has been taken in recognizing the need for reliable, consistent data, and how this is lacking for the Rocky Mountain tribes and reservations.

Juvenile Justice in Montana

Montana’s system places a great deal of emphasis on early intervention and prevention in its dealings with youth. In the events that these two options prove to be insufficient, the focus is on rehabilitation rather than punishment.

Two features of Montana’s juvenile justice system have proven to be valuable in reducing the number of youth in custody in the state. The first is the mandatory use of an assessment instrument for all youth placed on probation, while the second is the use an advanced Juvenile Court Assessment Tracking System.

The former helps identify mental health needs as well as aids in creating customized case plans for each youth, plans in which families are heavily involved. The latter enables probation officers and district court judges to track individual youths through the system, paying close attention to trends in offenses, dispositions, placements and services. This in turn allows analysis of what placements and services/treatments are the most effective in reducing recidivism.

Ultimately, Montana’s youth court laws are designed to keep youth out of the system, based on the understanding that most youth outgrow the types of crimes that would potentially lead to their arrests, such as truancy, MIP alcohol, and running away from home. □

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