Birth Defects Tracking and Prevention: Too Many States Are Not Making the Grade

Trust for America's Health
2002

Trust for America's Health
(www.healthyamericans.org)

Trust for America's Health (TFAH) is a national non-profit organization whose mission is to protect the health and safety of all communities, especially those most at risk of environmental and other public health threats. Our goal is to strengthen the nation's public health system through science-based research, community partnerships, education, and advocacy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Trust for America's Health is a non-profit organization founded by the Benjamin Spencer Fund in loving memory of Benjamin, whose compassion for others continues to guide and inspire us. TFAH is supported by The Pew Charitable Trusts, Joyce Foundation, Rockefeller Family Fund, The March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation, Bauman Foundation, Tortuga Foundation, Jenifer Altman Foundation, and Mitchell Kapor Foundation.

Trust for America's Health is supported by grants from the above foundations. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of these foundations.

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Birth Defects Investigative Team

PAUL A. LOCKE, JD, DrPH
Principal Investigator

SUDHA KODURU, MHS
Co-Investigator

MARGO EDMUNDS, PhD

ELLIS YINGVORAPANT, MSc, CRA

ANNA DILLINGHAM

AMY GOFFE

Trust for America's Health Staff

SHELLEY A. HEARNE, DrPH
Executive Director

PAUL A. LOCKE, JD, DrPH
Deputy Director

LOIS D. BANKS
Director of Community Health

ELLA CAIN
Office Manager

ANNA DILLINGHAM
Communications Specialist

MARGO EDMUNDS, PhD
Director of Research and Policy

AMY GOFFE
Director of Communications

SUDHA KODURU, MHS
Policy Analyst

CLARISSA LEE
Executive Assistant

GREGORY MACIAS
Tracking Campaign Coordinator

SUSAN L. POLAN, PhD
Director of Government Relations

MANDY REYNOLDS
Legislative Assistant

Board of Directors

Birth Defects Report Peer Reviewers

These individuals have provided peer review on the draft of this report. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the peer reviewers.

MARK CANFIELD, PhD
Director, Texas Birth Defects Monitoring Division; President, National Birth Defects Prevention Network, 2001

LARRY EDMONDS, MSPH
National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities, CDC

LYNN R. GOLDMAN, MD, MPH
Professor, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

NANCY GREEN, MD
Acting Medical Director, The March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation

JOHN HARRIS, MD, MPH
Director, California Birth Defects Monitoring Program

RUTH J. KATZ, JD, MPH
Associate Dean for Administration, Yale University School of Medicine

DONALD R. MATTISON, MD
Former Medical Director, The March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation

CAROL STANTON, MBA
Colorado Responds to Children with Special Needs; Chair, Surveillance Guidelines and Standards Committee, National Birth Defects Prevention Network

Trust for America's Health would also like to acknowledge the assistance of staff of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities and members of the National Birth Defects Prevention Network, who generously gave of their time and advice in assisting with the technical aspects of this report. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of these individuals. In particular we acknowledge: Mark Canfield, Jane Correia, Larry Edmonds, Don Mattison, John Meaney, Bob Meyer, Joann Petrini, Lowell Sever, and Carol Stanton.

Executive Summary

Birth Defects Are the Leading Cause of Death Among Infants

Birth defects are the leading cause of death among infants in the United States, accounting for approximately one out of every five infant deaths per year. Birth defects also account for a similar proportion of total deaths for children ages one to fourteen. Every year, about 150,000 babies are born in the United States with some kind of birth defect. While many birth defects can be surgically treated, a child affected by a birth defect may often need frequent and painful medical care and suffer serious health, emotional and social burdens. These burdens affect not only the child but also that child's family and society as a whole.

Beyond the direct emotional and health impacts on affected children and their families, medical treatment and support services are a tremendous financial burden. For example, for children born in 1988, the lifetime expenses associated with 12 selected birth defects could amount to more than $8 billion in today's dollars, or anywhere from $140,000 to $700,000 per child.

Despite Reduced Infant Mortality, Birth Defects Persist

Infant mortality has fallen dramatically in the last several decades. During this same period, infant death due to congenital malformations has proportionally been steadily increasing. Unfortunately, the causes of most birth defects are still unknown. Factors such as personal behaviors (e.g. alcohol or drug use by the mother) create well-known risks. Exposure to environmental hazards may play a role in some birth defects. However, researchers lack essential data to explore these and other links. Without knowing the causes of birth defects, we are helpless to prevent them.

Birth Defects Registries: A Key to Prevention

State monitoring programs and registries provide researchers with basic information about rates of birth defects and can help identify trends. When combined with studies of genetics, molecular biology, etiologic investigations and environmental exposures, the information provided by birth defects registries has the potential to help uncover the causes of these conditions and prevent future cases.

Too Many States Are Not Making the Grade

Despite the effectiveness and value of birth defects registries, too many states do not have adequate programs. In 2000, more than 600,000 births were not covered by a working registry and almost 300,000 births occurred in states with no registries at all. Today, about one million births—as many as 25%—are not covered in birth defects monitoring programs.

As part of its ongoing efforts to promote nationwide tracking of chronic diseases, the Trust for America's Health (TFAH) has examined birth defects registries on a state-by-state basis, giving each one a letter grade of A, B, C, D or F. Final grades were based on a number of criteria, including ability to carry out tracking, data use, prevention and research capacity, data sharing capacity and resources devoted to the task.

As shown in Table 4 and the map on page 14, only eight programs in the 50 states, the District of Columbia and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico earned an A. Even among these registries, certain minimum standards were not always met. The majority of states did not make the grade. Nine states have no program at all, or a program so marginal that it received an F. Fourteen programs earned a B and 10 received a C. Another 11 received a D, indicating that they are only beginning to develop programs.

Two-thirds of states with registries do not explore any possible links between birth defects and environmental exposure information. That means that opportunities to learn about potential causes and prevention of birth defects are being lost.

TFAH has found that state health officials want to build capacity for birth defects surveillance, but they lack the necessary resources to do so. If we are to make progress in tackling the causes of birth defects, each state must have a technically solid, complete, and ongoing monitoring program and registry. For states to make progress, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) must more fully support tracking and monitoring efforts, and states must devote resources so that their registries are sustainable from year to year.

This report builds on the 1999 Pew Environmental Health Commission's report ***Healthy from the Start: Why America Needs a Better System to Track and Understand Birth Defects and the Environment***. TFAH has expanded the grading system used by the Pew Commission and also established a set of minimum program standards. TFAH will be issuing a report examining birth defects monitoring programs every two years to chart progress in this important area, highlight gaps, and identify recommendations for improvement.

Recommendations

To help prevent future birth defects, state registries must be improved and established where they do not exist. TFAH urges the following steps be taken as rapidly as possible:

National Action Step

- The United States needs a nationwide health tracking network built on current and planned state efforts that provides researchers, policy makers and communities data about chronic diseases, including birth defects, and about environmental factors that might be linked to them. This system should protect confidentiality and encourage chronic disease prevention, not just identification and treatment. Birth defects monitoring programs should be a vital part of this nationwide health tracking network.

CDC Action Steps

- By 2003, CDC should finalize standards for birth defects registries and monitoring programs. The minimum standards outlined in this report provide CDC with a place to start. The new CDC Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities should provide leadership in ensuring that states reach or exceed minimum standards. The Center should also ensure that data from different states can be compared.

- By 2004, CDC should collaborate with the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, the Environmental Protection Agency, or other federal agencies to fund up to 10 state pilot studies that examine the links between the environment and birth defects.

- By 2004, CDC should fund birth defects programs in every state.

State Action Steps

- By 2004, every state should meet or exceed minimum registry standards established by CDC. States that currently do not meet the minimum standards should develop a plan at once to achieve them. States that are at or above minimum standards should develop a plan to ensure and maintain quality programs.

- By 2004, every state should identify or create sources of data about environmental exposures. Birth defects monitoring programs should use these data to explore the connections between environmental exposures and birth defects.

- By 2004, every state legislature should provide 25% of the funding for its birth defects monitoring program. This commitment is necessary to ensure that states can maintain sustainable programs in collaboration with CDC.

Birth Defects – A Sobering National Picture

A birth defect is an abnormality of structure, function or body metabolism (inborn error of body chemistry) present at birth that results in physical or mental disability, or is fatal.

— March of Dimes

Every year, about four million babies are born in the United States. Approximately 150,000 of them—about 3-4%—are born with some kind of birth defect.

Birth defects can create considerable health, emotional, and social burdens on affected children, families, and society. Many birth defects can be surgically treated, such as diaphragmatic hernia (a hole in the diaphragm that causes the abdomen to protrude). However, children affected by birth defects may often need frequent and painful medical care.

Birth defects are the leading cause of infant mortality in our nation, accounting for approximately 20% of all infant deaths each year. That means we can predict with some certainty that about 6,000 of the infants born in 2002 who die before their first birthday will die because of a birth defect.[i] On average, about half of the children who die from a birth defect have cardiovascular (heart and/or circulatory) defects; 15% have central nervous system defects; and 12% have chromosomal defects.

What is Happening in Warren County?

In Warren County, Illinois, Jo Sorensen wonders why so many babies in her community are born with birth defects and developmental disabilities. Jo, a special education teacher with over 20 years of experience, became concerned because of the number of cases she was seeing. Because Warren County (located near the Illinois-Iowa border) does not have its own health department, Jo appealed to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) for help. In her letter to the CDC, Jo noted that Warren County "is in the heart of agricultural land, so pesticides and herbicides are used in the area."

In September 2000, the Illinois Adverse Pregnancy Outcomes Reporting System, operated by IDPH, conducted an investigation that found a significant excess of birth defects in Warren County. Where 43 defects would have been expected during the period 1989-1998, 63 were found. The study also found a significant excess of genitourinary defects, which impair the urinary tract. Because Illinois had a statewide registry, at least Jo could get a partial answer to her question. She and her community now know that a higher than expected number of birth defects are being seen.

But what caused these cases? Most likely, public health officials cannot tell Jo why these birth defects occurred, or what can be done to prevent them. Until states and the federal government make a greater investment in birth defects monitoring programs and registries, nationwide health tracking and studies to examine the causes of diseases such as birth defects, these vital questions will go unanswered.

Source: Illinois Department of Public Health, Incidence of Birth Defects in Warren County, Illinois. September 2000. Jo Sorensen, letter to CDC, IDPH, Knox County Health Department. August 9, 2000.

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[i] Projection based on figures from Hoyert DL, Arias E, Smith BL, Murphy SL, Kochanek KD. Deaths: Final Data for 1999. National Vital Statistics Report; 49(8). Hyattsville, Maryland: National Center for Health Statistics. 2001.

Deaths from birth defects continue to take their toll among older children too. They account for approximately 15.5% of deaths among children one to four years old; 8% among the five to nine year-old age group; and 6% in the ten to 14 year-old category. In fact, among children aged one to 14, one study estimated that birth defects could account for 21.5% of total deaths.

Beyond their direct impact on the children who suffer from them, birth defects also exact an enormous emotional and social toll on American families and communities. While the emotional burden is impossible to quantify, scientists have been able to calculate some of the economic costs. A recent study looked at costs associated with medical treatment, developmental services, special education and lost productivity as a result of death or disability from certain birth defects. For the children born in just one year (1988), the lifetime expenses associated with just 12 of these birth defects could amount to over $8 billion in today's dollars. This estimate does not include other economic burdens, such as lost wages for families caring for these children.

Table 1: Average Lifetime Cost Per Child with Selected Birth Defects, 2001[ii]

Birth Defects	**Estimated Cost**
Genetic Defects	
Down Syndrome	$647,200
Heart Defects	
Truncus arteriosus	$724,692
Transposition of the great vessels	$383,154
Tetralogy of Fallot	$375,979
Limb Defects	
Reduction defect-lower limbs	$285,572
Reduction defect-upper limbs	$142,068
Muscle Defects	
Diaphragmatic hernia	$358,759
Esophageal atresia/tracheoesophageal fistula	$208,080
Colon, rectal or anal atresia	$176,509
Gastroschisis	$156,419
Neural Tube Defects	
Spina bifida	$421,900
Oral-Facial Defects	
Cleft lip or palate	$144,938

Note: Figures are based on lifetime cost estimates for the 1988 California birth cohort (adjusted for differences in costs and numbers of births between California and the nation and for cost inflation between 1988 and 1992. The 1992 cost figures were adjusted for inflation and are presented in 2001 dollars.).

[ii] John Harris and James Levy. State-by-State Cost of Birth Defects -- 1992. ***Teratology*** 56(1-2):11-16 (1997).

Table 2: Estimated Incidences for Selected Birth Defects, 2000[iii]

Birth Defect	**Estimated Incidence**
Heart and circulation	1 in 115 births
Muscle and skeleton	1 in 130 births
Down Syndrome	1 in 900 births
Cleft lip/palate	1 in 930 births
Spina bifida	1 in 2,000 births

Note: Figures are based on available estimates, which underestimate true incidence of many birth defects.

Preventing Birth Defects: Are We Doing What It Takes?

Given the enormous economic, social and emotional costs that birth defects impose, we should expect that our local, state and federal institutions would respond swiftly and effectively to find the causes of birth defects and reduce or eliminate them whenever possible. But the numbers show we are not doing all we can.

Today the causes of between 65% and 80% of birth defects are unknown. Without knowing the causes of birth defects, we are helpless to prevent them. Our lack of knowledge about how to prevent birth defects is surprising in light of the advances we have made in combating diseases and death in infants over the past 50 years. Particularly in the last several decades, infant mortality has fallen dramatically, mainly due to improvements in medical care right before and after birth. During this same time period, however, infant death due to congenital malformations has proportionally been steadily increasing.

Prevention Works: Reducing Neural Tube Defects by Folic Acid Fortification

Public health research and practice has demonstrated that prevention works.

In the early 1990s, public health scientists confirmed that consuming about 400 micrograms of folic acid before conception and during early pregnancy prevents the occurrence of neural tube defects (NTDs) such as spina bifida. In 1996, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration authorized the addition of folic acid to enriched grain products to ensure that women of childbearing age get the folic acid they need. Mandatory folic acid fortification of enriched grain products began in January 1998.

Birth prevalence of NTDs has decreased 19% since folic acid fortification began, according to a study published in the ***Journal of the American Medical Association*** (June 20, 2001). As an editorial in the same issue pointed out: “the study … provides important information – food fortification works.”

Source: US Public Health Service. Recommendations for the use of folic acid to reduce the number of cases of spina bifida and other neural tube defects. ***Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report***, 1992. 41(RR-14): p. 1-7.
James L Mills and Lucinda England. Food Fortification to Prevent Neural Tube Defects: Is It Working? ***Journal of the American Medical Association*** 285(23):3022-23 (June 20, 2001).

[iii] Adapted from March of Dimes “Leading Categories of Birth Defects” available at http://www.modimes.org/HealthLibrary2/InfantHealthStatistics/bdtable.htm.

Many Questions, Few Answers

Despite the lack of overall progress, public health scientists have identified many of the factors that can affect the health of developing babies. These include social, behavioral and environmental factors, such as smoking, prescription medication and alcohol use by pregnant women; conditions that cause injury that are outside of personal control, such as motor vehicle accidents; and the presence of toxic agents in the environment such as radiation, chemicals and metals. Some factors (consumption of alcohol or tobacco during pregnancy, for example) create well-known risks for developing babies. Other factors—deficiencies in folic acid, for instance—are being addressed by adding supplements to the diets of women of childbearing years. However, according to the CDC, two-thirds of women in the U.S. still do not get enough folic acid (0.4 milligrams) every day.

While information is available on some of the most significant social and behavioral factors that may cause birth defects, much less is known about how exposure to toxic substances in water, air, food and soil could potentially affect developing babies. We know that many of the compounds used in agriculture and in our homes and gardens have been shown to cause birth defects in animal tests. Of the top 20 agricultural and household use pesticides in this country (based on 1995 data), four are recognized developmental toxicants and five are suspected developmental toxicants. These pesticides include 2,4-D, the number one ranked household pesticide by millions of pounds used, which is a suspected developmental toxicant. In 1995, an estimated seven to nine million pounds of 2,4-D were used in American homes.

Table 3: Selected Birth Defects for Which Environmental Factors Are Suspected to be a Cause[iv]

Birth Defect	Definition
Anencephaly	Absence/near absence of brain
Atrial septal defect	Opening(s) in wall between two upper heart chambers
Cleft lip	Failure of lip components to join
Cleft palate	Failure of palate components to join
Gastroschisis	Opening in wall of intestines
Hypospadias/epispadias	Urinary outlet on males is in abnormal position on penis
Spina bifida	Failure of spinal cord to close
Tetralogy of Fallot	Four serious heart defects combined
Transposition of the great arteries	Heart defect; pulmonary artery, aorta switched
Ventricular septal defect	Opening(s) in wall between two lower heart chambers

Note: This list is not exhaustive.

[iv] Pew Environmental Health Commission. ***Healthy from the Start: Why America Needs a Better System to Track and Understand Birth Defects and the Environment***. Baltimore, MD. 1999.

Beyond pesticides, recent research has uncovered a link between exposure to air pollution and the occurrence of certain birth defects.

To understand more fully what environmental factors threaten developing babies, much additional information is needed. Some of that information could come from birth defects monitoring programs, if they were up to the task. At present, only 33% of the 52 jurisdictions examined (all 50 states, Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia) conduct or collaborate on studies of birth defects and environmental exposures. Increasing the number and quality of these types of etiologic studies could be very valuable in uncovering the causes of birth defects and determining how birth defects can be prevented. If solid evidence is uncovered linking environmental factors and birth defects, it might be possible to control or eliminate these exposures. In other words, conditions caused by environmental exposures are potentially preventable.

Does Air Pollution Cause Birth Defects?

In the first rigorous study to look at air pollution and birth defects, a group of California researchers, including scientists at the University of California at Los Angeles, discovered evidence that air pollution might play a role in causing some birth defects. Researchers conducted the study by matching extensive air pollution monitoring data from the US Environmental Protection Agency with information from the California Birth Defects Monitoring Program.

Mothers' exposure to four air pollutants—carbon monoxide, ozone, nitrogen dioxide and particulates—was estimated. Children with birth defects were compared to children without birth defects based on their exposure to air pollution. Pregnant women living in areas with higher levels of ozone and carbon monoxide pollution were as much as three times more likely to have had babies with serious birth defects, and the greater a mother's exposure to these pollutants in the critical second month of pregnancy, the greater the chance that the baby would have a serious cardiac defect. While this evidence is compelling, researchers caution that additional studies are essential. Unfortunately, too few states can link birth defects and environmental exposure data to carry out confirming studies.

Source: Beate Ritz, Fei Yu, Scott Fruin, Guadalupe Chapa, Gary M Shaw, and John Harris. Ambient Air Pollution and Risk of Birth Defects in Southern California, ***American Journal of Epidemiology.*** 155(1):17-25 (2002).

Progress is Being Made, But Major Gaps Remain

As a nation, we should not accept the 150,000 or more birth defects that occur each year. Public health and medical scientists are just beginning to develop the tools and skills needed to combat birth defects, and the nation should be prepared to take immediate action. What's missing is the political will to boost resources devoted to such efforts.

The good news is that some of the steps needed to prevent birth defects are being taken. For instance:

- The CDC contains a new center dedicated to birth defects and developmental disabilities that promises to provide leadership for prevention and research efforts. In addition, CDC has established eight state centers for birth defects research throughout the country.

- Based on clinical trials and epidemiologic research, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has required that folic acid supplements be added to enriched grain products, which research shows is likely to continue to cut down the number of neural tube defects (NTDs).
- A substantial national investment has been made in studying the molecular and genetic components of birth defects. Genetics and molecular biology are obviously important because, at its core, conception is a series of molecular reactions and a mixing of genes. Also, as the embryo and fetus develop, genes play a paramount role in controlling and orchestrating growth.

While we can expect studies about molecular biology and genetics to yield valuable insights, without other public health data about exposure to possible risk factors and birth defects monitoring information, we cannot carry out effective studies to help us unravel the mysteries of what ***causes*** birth defects. Molecular interactions and genetic makeup are only pieces of a much larger puzzle. In order to understand the events that lead to birth defects—and develop strategies to prevent them—we have to understand the factors that affect developing babies and their mothers. The capacity to carry out

The CDC's National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities

In 2001, Congress established the National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities (NCBDDD) within CDC to promote optimal fetal, infant and child development, prevent birth defects and developmental disabilities, and enhance quality of life among those living with a disability.

NCBDDD is a key player in the fight to prevent birth defects and improve state birth defects monitoring programs. Among other things, it provides grants to state programs and university-based birth defects centers and promotes epidemiologic prevention-based research.

In January 2002, the three-year CDC cooperative agreements to 18 states expired. In March 2002, CDC will award 20 new cooperative agreements that will bring the total number of states with CDC funding for birth defects monitoring programs to 35. Currently, CDC is funding eight cooperative agreements until 2003 (Arizona, Connecticut, Illinois, Louisiana, Puerto Rico, Rhode Island, Washington and Wisconsin) plus seven Centers for Birth Defects Research and Prevention (see below).

Source: CDC, http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/dd/default.htm and TFAH contacts with CDC.

State Centers for Birth Defects Research and Prevention

Established in 1996 by the CDC, the Centers for Birth Defects Research and Prevention (CBDRP) carry out research to find the causes of birth defects. The Centers are located in Arkansas, California, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Texas and at CDC in the NCBDDD. They participate in the National Birth Defects Prevention Study (NBDPS), one of the largest studies conducted on the causes of birth defects, including both genetic and environmental risk factors. The NBDPS involves three parts: 1) a case-control study to compare infants with birth defects and those without birth defects to identify any factors that increase the risk for or protect against birth defects; 2) 12,000 interviews with mothers over a five-year period to obtain detailed medical history, potential exposures in the home and workplace, and pregnancy information; and 3) collection of infant and parental cheek cells to identify genetic factors. The results of the NBDPS are expected to have wide- and far-reaching significance in preventing birth defects.

Source: CDC, "Centers for Birth Defects Research and Prevention," available at http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/pub/cbdrpbk.pdf.

epidemiologic research—public health science aimed at prevention—is essential. Large-scale studies in human populations aimed at uncovering the causes of birth defects—etiological studies—also represent a productive scientific avenue for finding risk factors. TFAH found that only 40% of state birth defects programs reported that they conduct or collaborate on such research.

Several states have on-going birth defects studies that look at environmental factors. Three are highlighted below:

> **California**: The California Birth Defects Monitoring Program's (CBDMP) mission is to find causes of birth defects. In addition to maintaining a registry, the Program conducts large, population-based case-control studies with concentration on uncovering gene-environment interactions. In addition to interviewing mothers, biologic and environmental samples are collected to determine risk factors. The Program has published findings on such environmental exposures as hazardous waste sites, drinking water contaminants, pesticides, and air pollution. Collaborations with state environmental programs include Department of Pesticide Regulation, Drinking Water and Environmental Management Division, Environmental Health Investigations Branch and Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment. These studies can be found on the CBDMP website at http://www.cbdmp.org.
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> **Iowa**: Part of the mission of the Iowa Birth Defects Registry (IBDR) is to conduct research to identify genetic and environmental risk factors for birth defects. The IBDR has collaborated with the Iowa Department of Public Health to conduct geographic information systems (GIS) studies of potential environmental risk factors and birth defects. In addition, it has worked with the University of Iowa Center for Health Effects of Environmental Contamination to investigate risk of orofacial clefts associated with certain drinking water contaminants. Other studies assessing risk of selected birth defects and agricultural pesticides are underway between the IBDR and this Center. More information about the studies that IBDR is conducting can be found on its website at http://www.public-health.uiowa.edu/birthdefects/.
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> **Missouri**: The Missouri Birth Defect Registry was developed, in part, to provide birth defects data for environmental tracking. The Registry has collaborated with the Division of Environmental Health and Communicable Disease Prevention and the Department of Natural Resources to study birth defects and other adverse health effects in areas containing hazardous waste. Information about this registry can be found at http://www.health.state.mo.us/Publications/MOSRVSYS.pdf on pages 121-122.

Tracking Birth Defects—A Key to Prevention

To truly make progress in preventing birth defects, this country needs to do a first-class job of tracking birth defects state-by-state. State-by-state tracking of birth defects is usually carried out by state health departments, which apply public health science to set up monitoring programs that look for birth defects cases in the state and follow them, while protecting privacy, through a centralized registry or database. With top-notch scientific information about birth defects, public health practitioners can more rapidly answer questions that communities are asking about risk factors and more readily study the causes of birth defects and how to prevent them.

For similar reasons, the United States needs a nationwide system for tracking chronic diseases, such as cancer and asthma. Without such a system, health officials have little chance of determining what causes many chronic diseases.

State monitoring programs and registries and a nationwide health tracking network are two of the foundations on which this country should build efforts to reduce the number of birth defects. Registries provide public health scientists with basic information about what birth defects are occurring, in what areas, and whether there is a trend. The information can be used to better target resources, provide services to affected families and study the causes of birth defects and the risk factors involved. Registries can also help to determine whether public policy changes have led to a reduction in birth defects.

While the value of birth defects programs and registries are clear, the establishment and maintenance of such systems are complicated matters. In carrying out the research for this report, TFAH learned that there is no such thing as a “perfect” state monitoring program or registry. In fact, when it comes to monitoring programs and registries, one size definitely does not fit all. States need flexibility to design birth defects programs that work for them, given the unique geography, population base, environmental exposures and resource limitations they confront. TFAH also learned that states are doing a yeoman’s job of establishing and running birth defects programs, often without adequate resources and attention. Nevertheless, this flexibility does not preclude the need to meet certain minimum standards so that the registry can collect, analyze and disseminate useful data. Moreover, our nationwide need to compare trends across states means that monitoring programs must have enough in common so that the information they generate can be pieced together to get a picture of how we, as a nation, are doing.

The CDC must take the lead in getting states to adopt minimum standards. The failure to establish national standards to date has resulted in a patchwork of registries across the nation. As one of its first acts, CDC’s new birth defects center should establish minimum standards for states. It is also critical that CDC’s new center develop ways that birth defects information can be compared across states so that a nationwide picture can be drawn.

The Grading System

This report builds on the 1999 Pew Environmental Health Commission's report ***Healthy from the Start: Why America Needs a Better System to Track and Understand Birth Defects and the Environment***. The Commission's report (available at TFAH's website www.healthyamericans.org) explained the important role that birth defects registries play in public health prevention and also graded state registries.

TFAH is pleased to continue—and expand—the work begun by the Commission. TFAH built upon the grading system first used by the Commission and developed a set of minimum standards for registries. TFAH's goal is to release a report every two years that will chart progress in this important area, highlight gaps, and identify recommendations for improvement. This is TFAH's commitment to ensuring the overall quality of a comprehensive nationwide tracking network for chronic diseases, environmental factors and a public health system that can take action in preventing disease.

In this report, TFAH has examined the work that birth defects monitoring programs are doing and how they are doing it. Using an extensive database developed by the National Birth Defects Prevention Network (NBDPN),[v] birth defects tracking activities in all 50 states, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia were graded. TFAH worked with the NBDPN to define and assign weights to important program criteria, including the states' tracking capacity, data use, collection and dissemination, and funding and resources.

The NBDPN, formed in 1997, is an organization of individuals involved in birth defects tracking, research and prevention. The NBDPN assisted us by:

- Providing access to NBDPN's updated electronic program directory database;
- Providing guidance on the interpretation and limitations of data elements in this database;
- Advising TFAH on developing a survey of additional questions; and
- Facilitating contact with state members of the NBDPN.

In grading the registries, TFAH researchers were guided by the program criteria we developed in conjunction with the NBDPN, the minimum standards and our follow-up research and interviews with state birth defects registry officials. TFAH knows that this grading process, while rigorous, is not perfect. For a number of reasons, minimum standards could not be established for every important criterion. Still, it is TFAH's belief that these minimum standards will provide a foundation for the CDC to build upon, and we call on the new birth defects center to refine and finalize these standards by 2003.

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[v] This database is published in the journal *Teratology*. See *Teratology* 64:Supplement 1 (2001). TFAH updated and supplemented the information in the database.

TFAH researchers assigned a letter grade to 52 jurisdictions: the 50 states, the District of Columbia and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. Each jurisdiction was given a letter grade, from A to F, to present a snapshot of the program.

Grade A states: Eight states received an A. All have programs that use active surveillance (i.e., staff seek out cases) and are distinguished by the detail paid to collecting, verifying, and ascertaining cases. These programs rely on high quality data sources and cover the full range of birth defects over an age range that extends to the first birthday. Seven of these states have studied the link between environmental factors and birth defects. Receiving an A grade does not mean that these programs are perfect. In fact, all could be improved—two do not publish data in a timely fashion, and two do not cover births in the entire state.

Grade B and C states: Twenty-four states received a B or C. These states achieved some of the criteria needed to be fully effective. They fall short in areas such as the ability to link data sources, the coverage of births (i.e., not statewide), the number of birth defects tracked, or the methods of data collection and quality assurance.

Grade D states: Eleven states received a D. These states have less than fully active programs, or report that they are now starting programs. Some of these programs have been launched since 1999. This group of "emerging" state programs has not yet reported on the data they have collected.

Grade F states: Nine states received an F. These states have marginal or no birth defects monitoring programs or registries.

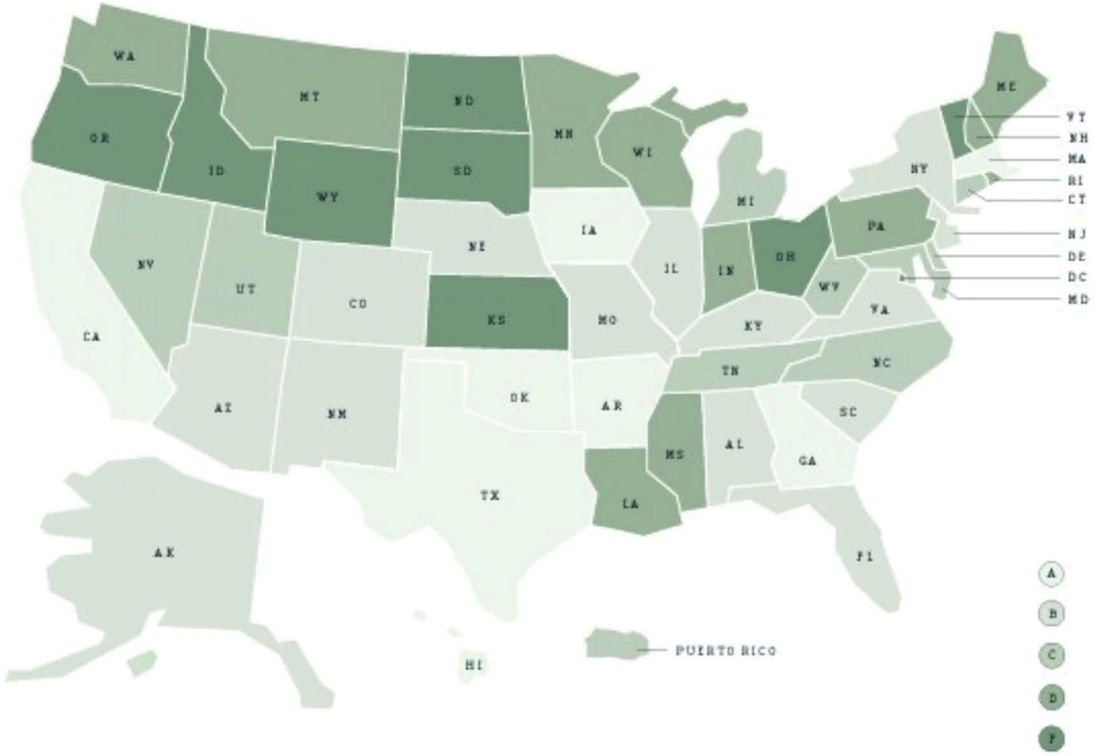
Table 4: State Birth Defects Monitoring Programs Scorecard

State	Grade	State	Grade
Alabama	**B**	Montana	**D**
Alaska	**B**	Nebraska	**B**
Arizona	**B**	Nevada	**C**
Arkansas	**A**	New Hampshire	**D**
California	**A**	New Jersey	**B**
Colorado	**B**	New Mexico	**B**
Connecticut	**C**	New York	**B**
Delaware	**C**	North Carolina	**C**
District of Columbia	**F**	North Dakota*	**F**
Florida	**B**	Ohio	**F**
Georgia	**A**	Oklahoma	**A**
Hawaii	**A**	Oregon	**F**
Idaho	**F**	Pennsylvania	**D**
Illinois	**B**	Puerto Rico	**C**
Indiana	**D**	Rhode Island	**D**
Iowa	**A**	South Carolina	**B**
Kansas*	**F**	South Dakota	**F**
Kentucky	**B**	Tennessee	**C**
Louisiana	**D**	Texas	**A**

Maine	**D**	Utah	**C**
Maryland	**C**	Vermont	**F**
Massachusetts	**A**	Virginia	**B**
Michigan	**C**	Washington	**D**
Minnesota	**D**	West Virginia	**C**
Mississippi	**D**	Wisconsin	**D**
Missouri	**B**	Wyoming	**F**

Note: States marked with an asterisk (*) have vital records reporting only.

State Grades of Birth Defects Monitoring Programs, 2002



Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions:

- CDC has not set minimum national standards for registries. This has led to a patchwork of registries that prevents national studies and state-to-state comparisons.

- In 2000, there were close to 615,000 births not covered by working registries and almost 297,000 births in states with no registries at all. For 2002, it is estimated that close to one million births will not be included in birth defects monitoring programs.

- Of the 52 jurisdictions studied for this report, eight registries received an A, 14 received a B, 10 received a C, 11 received a D, and nine received an F.

- Two-thirds of the registries do not link data to environmental exposure information from other programs. This means that opportunities to learn about potential causes and prevention of birth defects are being lost.

- The federal government's funding of birth defects registries is inadequate. In March 2002, CDC will be funding registries in only 35 states. State government funding of registries is also inadequate. Currently, 33 states have yet to meet TFAH's suggested minimum funding level of 10% of costs.

Recommendations

National Action Step

- The nation needs a nationwide health tracking network built on current and planned state efforts that provides researchers, policy makers and communities data about chronic diseases, including birth defects, and about environmental factors that might be linked to them. This system should protect confidentiality and encourage chronic disease prevention, not just identification and treatment. Birth defects monitoring programs should be a vital part of this nationwide health tracking network.

CDC Action Steps

- By 2003, CDC should finalize standards for birth defects registries and monitoring programs. We believe that the minimum standards outlined in this report provide a good starting place for CDC. The new CDC Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities should provide leadership in ensuring that states reach or exceed minimum standards. The Center should also ensure that data from different states can be compared.

- By 2004, CDC should collaborate with the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, the Environmental Protection Agency, or other federal agencies to fund up to 10 state pilot studies that examine the links between the environment and birth defects.

- By 2004, CDC should fund birth defects programs in every state.

State Action Steps

- By 2004, every state should meet or exceed minimum registry standards established by CDC. States that currently do not meet the minimum standards should develop a plan at once to achieve them. States that are at or above minimum standards should develop a plan to ensure and maintain quality programs.

- By 2004, every state should identify or create sources of data about environmental exposures. Birth defects monitoring programs should use these data to explore the connections between environmental exposures and birth defects.

- By 2004, every state legislature should provide 25% of the funding for its birth defects monitoring program. This commitment is necessary to ensure that states can maintain sustainable programs in collaboration with CDC.