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## **States Get Poor Grades on Birth Defects Prevention**

### ***Group Calls for Better Systems to Track and Prevent #1 Cause of Infant Deaths***

**Washington, DC** – Most states are doing a poor job of tracking and preventing birth defects, which are the #1 cause of infant mortality in the United States, a new report says. Birth defects account for almost 20% of all infant deaths each year.

The report -- *Birth Defects Tracking and Prevention: Too Many States Are Not Making the Grade* -- was authored by The Trust for America's Health (TFAH), a Washington, DC -based advocacy group. The report gives each of the 50 states, plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, a letter grade based on their efforts to monitor and research birth defects. Only eight states receive an A, although even they need improvement, the report says. More than half the states received a C, a D or an F.

According to the report, state monitoring programs can play a crucial role in birth defects prevention by collecting information about which birth defects are occurring and where. But most states are doing an inadequate job of providing this data.

Exposure to environmental hazards may play a role in some birth defects. However, here again, researchers lack essential data to explore these and other links. Two-thirds of states with registries do not explore any possible links between birth defects and environmental exposures.

“Our report shows we lack the most basic tool for preventing birth defects – information,” said TFAH Executive Director Dr. Shelley Hearne. “Without knowing the causes of birth defects, we are helpless to prevent them. Health officials want to build health-tracking capacity, but they lack the necessary resources.”

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## **Birth Defects Take a Significant Toll**

According to the March of Dimes, in the United States, approximately 150,000 babies are born each year with birth defects – one out of every 28 infants. Many factors, including genetic and environmental factors, can cause birth defects. However, the causes of as many as 80 percent of birth defects are currently unknown.

Beyond the often serious health problems experienced by the child, birth defects also place tremendous emotional and social burdens on parents, and financial costs that can range from \$140,000 to \$700,000 over a child's lifetime. It is estimated that for children born nationwide in 1988, the lifetime expenses associated with just 12 birth defects are more than \$8 billion in today's dollars.

### **Recommendations**

According to the report, the most important steps needed at the state and federal levels are:

- States should improve their birth defects registries, create them where they don't exist, and ensure adequate funding;
- The CDC should establish minimum national standards and help fund birth defects registries in every state;
- Congress should establish a nationwide health tracking network for chronic diseases like birth defects, cancer and asthma. The Network would build on the birth defects registries and other current efforts to track chronic and infectious diseases and conditions.

### **About TFAH and This Report**

The Trust for America's Health 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.

The full text of the report and state-specific fact sheets are available on the TFAH Web site at [www.healthyamericans.org](http://www.healthyamericans.org).