

High school dropout rates and teen pregnancies are on the rise in the state ... two major areas of concern for Citizens for Missouri's Children. Osage County might be the best place to raise a child in the state. St. Louis City might be the worst. Citizens for Missouri's Children tallies data from all counties and the City of St. Louis for its annual Kids Count, which is used by communities and legislators to identify need and apply for grants to boost service programs in certain areas. "This would have been the first time that there would have been a full year of recession impact, I don't think the changes were as drastic as they might be," he says. "That's not to say that it's not still to come because the data began in December 2008, when unemployment was around 6 or 7 percent, it's gone up. On the good side, it's not as bad as we thought, on the bad side, it's going to likely get worse." Gee says as unemployment climbs, a delayed impact might be seen on next year's report. He says dropout rates stand out as a problem. There are "30 counties, and that's a large amount, we had a higher high school dropout rate than the state rate [average] in 2008." The report ranks various other factors, such as birth weight, infant mortality, and more. Ripley, Dunklin and Pemiscot counties — in the bootheel — ranked last. Julie Leicht, Policy Director, says the City of St. Louis typically ranks last. Beyond that, last on the list are: Sullivan, Ripley, Pemiscot, Dunklin ... and then St. Louis, in that order. Best in the state ranked are (in order) Osage, St. Charles, Platte, Andrew and Worth, "so that's kind of scattered all over the state," Leicht says. However, Gee says the list / report is not formulated for competition, but rather "it's a barometer of how our kids are faring in the state, and how Missouri ranks among other states in the nation. A lot of other not-for-profit organizations use this data when they apply for grants." "We know that our data has been used to obtain over a million dollars in grants for other charitable organizations in the community," he says. "We want it to be used as a tool by the communities to apply for grants where there is a need." Leicht says "We also provide the book to legislators and they're quite interested because they use it quite often in their work," adding that the Legislature likes to see if their areas need assistance in certain areas."

Use drugs, lose assistance from the state, the gist of a bill passing the House and moving to the Senate. Critics assailed the plan to strip Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, known as TANF, from anyone testing positive for drug use, still it passed Thursday on a 114-to-39 vote. It now moves to the Senate which has stalled in working on its own version. Rep. Ellen Brandom (R-Sikeston) defended HCS HB 1377 during House floor debate with Rep. James Morris (D-St. Louis) who said her bill would inadvertently hurt poor children. "Whose fault is it if they don't have the money for the child?" Brandom asked Morris. "Whose fault is it? It's certainly not the child's fault," Morris responded. "No, it's the parents," replied Brandom. "But, we're punishing the children," Morris stated. "I agree with you. It's not the children's fault, but that's who the victims are in this; the children." It is estimated that between 30,000 and 45,000 Missourians receive TANF benefits on any given month. Other critics accused the bill of targeting minorities and those living in cities, charges Brandom denied during House floor debate. Another sticking point for critics was the cost. It is estimated that administering the drug tests would cost \$2.6 million the first year and approximately \$3 million each year thereafter.