

Low-Birth-Weight Babies

Reducing the number of low-birth-weight babies to no more than 7.1 percent is a state and national goal for the year 2000. Low-birth weight is a national standard defined as babies weighing less than 2,500 grams (5.5 pounds).

Tennessee had 7.4 percent white and 13.8 percent African-American low-birth-weight babies born to mothers in 1997. Despite a decline in the percentage of low-birth-weight babies born to African-American mothers, African-American babies are still twice as likely to be low-birth weight as white babies.

In 1996, 8.8 percent of Tennessee's babies were low-birth-weight, as compared to the national average of 7.4 percent. With the rate almost 19 percent higher than the national average, Tennessee ranked worse than 44 other states.

This raises several troubling issues for Tennessee: 1) Research shows that women who do not receive adequate early prenatal care are more likely to give birth to low-birth weight babies; 2) Mothers who do not have insurance are less likely to seek and obtain prenatal care.

Large improvements in neonatal technology in the last two decades have significantly improved the survival prospects of very low-birth-weight babies (VLBW). The costs for these infants are substantial in relation to more cost-effective preventative measures.

A recent study supported by the Agency for Health Care Policy and Research indicated that it costs five times as much, on average, for a first-year infant survivor weighing less than 750 grams (1.7 pounds) at birth (\$273,900), compared to that for an infant weighing 2.8 to 3.3

