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Kids Count: Growing poverty threatens children's health

Recent Michigan policy decisions worsen the impact on kids

LANSING -- Child abuse and neglect in Bay County jumped 138 percent over the past decade while almost half of Bay K-12 children qualified for free and reduced price lunches, the latest Kids Count in Michigan Data Book concludes.

Michigan's long economic struggle is reflected in the new Kids Count findings. Children qualify for school-based meals if their family income is 185 percent of poverty or less. Studies confirm that families need income of about 200 percent of poverty – at least \$44,226 for a family of four – to cover basic needs without assistance. Poverty also drives up neglect cases.

"The findings show that kids in Bay County and across Michigan are still suffering the fallout from our long recession," said Jane Zehnder-Merrell, the Kids Count in Michigan director at the Michigan League for Human Services. "Poverty in Michigan is as big a threat to our children today as polio was to a previous generation. Fortunately, we can do something about this. We know that public policy can improve children's social and economic environment."

This year's report, *Health Matters*, focuses on child health and the role that the social and economic factors in children's lives play in good health.

The annual Data Book is released by the Kids Count in Michigan project. It is a collaboration between the Michigan League for Human Services, which researches and writes the report, and Michigan's Children, which works with advocates statewide to disseminate the findings. Both are nonpartisan, nonprofit advocacy organizations concerned about the well-being of children and their families.

"Children in poverty often experience hunger, abuse or neglect, extreme stress, depression or anxiety, and other issues impacting their overall health, as well as their ability to learn and grow into successful adults," said Michele Corey, vice president for programs at Michigan's Children. "The best public policies must address the whole child from cradle to career, and this data can help guide these policies."

The report ranks counties on 16 indicators of child well-being (with No. 1 being the best), though data is not available to rank smaller counties on all 16. Trends over time are available for 15 indicators, with nine indicators improving and six worsening.

Bay County's best ranking was 18th among all counties for child poverty with 17.9 percent of Bay County children in poverty compared with 22.2 percent statewide in 2009.

The county's worst ranking was No. 67 of 81 counties for low-birthweight babies (born weighing less than 5.5 pounds) with nearly 8.6 percent of Bay County babies being born too small compared with 8.5 percent statewide.

(more)

Statewide, the biggest improvements were in the area of education with fewer students considered not proficient in math and among adolescents with fewer births to teens, fewer teen deaths and fewer high school dropouts.

Michigan saw a small improvement in infant mortality from 2000-2009, although African American infants have triple the risk of mortality than that of white infants. There was also a 25 percent improvement in the rate of child deaths over the decade with 318 children (ages 1-14) dying in 2009, down from 471 in 2000.

Worsening trends included the rate of children confirmed as victims of abuse and neglect, which rose 34 percent statewide over the decade. In 2010, 32,500 Michigan children were confirmed victims with four out of every five suffering from neglect.

In 2010, almost half of K-12 public school students (46.5 percent) qualified for free or reduced price lunch, jumping from 36.2 percent in 2006.

The percent of children living in poverty jumped from 14 percent to 23 percent between 2000 and 2009. Even more startling is the rate of children living in extreme poverty – roughly less than \$11,000 a year for a family of four – jumped from 5 percent of children to 11 percent. That means that more than one in every 10 kids in Michigan is living in extremely desperate circumstances, living at half the poverty level.

Children growing up in poverty face lifelong consequences. They are less likely to graduate and more likely to suffer from heart disease, obesity and high blood pressure as adults.

“The impact of high unemployment and declining wages is leaving its mark on a generation of children,” Zehnder-Merrell said. “Unfortunately, policymakers have cut family supports aimed at blunting the impact of the economic downturn on kids.”

Recent policy decisions that negatively impact kids include:

- Cutting the Michigan Earned Income Tax Credit from 20 percent of the federal credit to 6 percent. The credit has been responsible for pushing 14,000 Michigan kids out of poverty.
- Placing stricter time limits on cash assistance for 12,000 families living in poverty, including nearly 30,000 children.
- Putting asset limits on food assistance that will impact the newly unemployed and divert needed federal aid from Michigan.
- Reducing the traditional period of unemployment from 26 to 20 weeks. The tough labor market means half of jobless workers search six months or longer before finding employment.

Kids Count in Michigan project is part of a broad national effort to improve conditions for children and their families. Funding for the project is provided by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Detroit-based Skillman Foundation, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan Foundation, local United Ways and the Battle Creek Community Foundation. The annual data book is available from the Michigan League for Human Services and on the web at www.milhs.org. More state and local data are available at the Kids Count Data Center, www.datacenter.kidscount.org.

Editors, please note: For general comment on the report and questions about data collection, please contact the Michigan League for Human Services at (517) 487-5436. For comment or help finding local sources to comment, please contact Michigan's Children at (517) 485-3500.