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# Report says recession hurts more Florida children

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## TALLAHASSEE

A new report Wednesday shows Florida trailing most other states in the health and education of its children – with an especially low ranking in economic well-being.

The effects are harmful and could be long-term – not just for the children but for the state, advocates say.

The annual Kids Count report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation ranks Florida 44th in the economic well-being of its children, 38th in their health outcomes and 35th in their educational performance.

The state ranks 38th overall.

The number of Florida children living in poverty is up 28 percent from 2005 to 2010, the last year for which data were included in the study. That measurement considers such factors as whether the parents have secure employment or the ability to cover their housing costs.

Ted Granger, president of the United Way of Florida, said he wasn't surprised by the ranking given the need local agencies are seeing.

Economic instability is "having a huge and dramatic effect on children," Granger said. "The largest group of new homeless are single parents with children. These children, whether or not homeless or in poverty, are part of a group that statistically we know have worse health care outcomes [and] lack the educational opportunities to realize their full potential."

In 2010, 23 percent of Florida children were living in poverty. The parents of 34 percent lacked secure employment, up from 28 percent in 2008. Nearly half of Florida households – 49 percent – saw their housing costs grow to 30 percent or more, up from 42 percent in 2005. The number of teens who were neither in school nor working was 10 percent, the same as in 2008.

In all these categories, Florida's stats were worse than the national average.

"I think it's a ticking time bomb," said Roy Miller, president of the Children's Campaign in Florida. "Children are exposed now in much larger numbers to poverty and all of its ill effects. So what's going to happen to those children five years, 10 years, [or] 15 years down the road? We don't know."

Susan Weitzel, Florida Kids Count director, said the state's children are growing up with risk factors that predict they will not succeed in Florida's future economy.

"When children are going to school hungry and do not know if they have a place to sleep at night, how can they be successful in the classroom?" she asked in a statement about the report.

David Wilkins, secretary of the Florida Department of Children and Families, agreed that his agency is seeing poor children at risk for future difficulties.

"When you see children in poverty over time, you may see them in other parts of the system, such as [the Department of Juvenile Justice] system or child welfare system," he said. "That's what we always have to be careful about and watch.

"The other thing that's in our state that a lot of other states aren't facing to anywhere the same level is the substance abuse and prescription drug problem," Wilkins added. "That's also crossing across that same demographic."

But while Wilkins said he wasn't surprised by the findings, he pointed out that the report's 2010 economic data don't include Gov. Rick Scott's job-creating efforts. Scott was inaugurated in January 2011.

"The issue of poverty in the state is driven almost entirely by the economic situation of jobs and the housing market," Wilkins said. "That's why the citizens elected this governor...In the past year, we've reduced unemployment in Florida another two percentage points.

"So I think we're heading in the right direction."

And the Kids Count report did have some good news for Florida. The number of uninsured children has dropped slightly, to half a million. Students are doing a bit better in reading and math, although still below the national average.

According to the Kids Count findings, while Florida ranked 44th among the states in terms of economic well-being, it was 38th overall, with better outcomes in four other areas.

The state ranked 35th in education. The number of Florida children not attending preschool in 2008-2010 was 51 percent, compared to 52 percent in 2005-2007. The number of high school students not graduating on time was 31 percent in 2008-2009, an improvement from 36 percent in 2005-2006. In two categories with 2011 data, 65 percent of fourth graders were not proficient in reading, compared to 70 percent in 2005, and 72 percent of eighth graders were not proficient in math, a slight improvement from 74 percent in 2005.

In children's health, Florida ranked 38th. In 2010, 13 percent of Florida kids lacked health insurance, compared to

18 percent in 2008 – although still below the national average of 8 percent. In 2009, child and teen deaths slowed to 29 per 100,000, down from 37 percent in 2005. The numbers of teens abusing alcohol and drugs dropped from 8 percent in 2005-2006 to 7 percent in 2008-2009. The number of low birth-weight babies stayed at 8.7 percent over the same period, compared to the national average of 8.2 percent.

Florida ranked 35th in the family and community category, with 39 percent of children living in single-parent families in 2010 – up from 36 percent in 2005. Between 2000 and 2010, the number of children living in high-poverty neighborhoods grew from 7 to 8 percent. Teen births per 1,000 dropped from 42 in 2005 to 39 in 2009. Between 2005 and 2010, the number of children in families where the head of household lacked a high school diploma dropped from 15 to 14 percent.

For children’s advocate Miller, the improvements are welcome but frustrating, since they show where the state has invested money successfully.

“And I think that’s the frustration of the child advocacy community,” he said. “Why don’t we make the investments in all the areas that need help, so that we see investments across the board?...We’re seeing investments save money and improve lives. Why aren’t we making better choices?”

But the United Way’s Granger said the Legislature is “between a rock and a hard place” when it comes to investing in children.

“We’ve underfunded these services for decades – probably forever,” he said. “We’re in a situation where we’ve got these crises, and we have to fund the crises. So it’s really a difficult balance [lawmakers] have to determine, ‘Do we fund the crisis of the moment, or do we fund something that’s going to give us results in five, six, 15, 20 years?’

“And unfortunately, the crises are such that they compel many of us to say we’ve got to fund the crisis.”

The Kids Count Data Book is available at <http://datacenter.kidscount.org>. For details on Florida, visit [www.floridakidscount.org](http://www.floridakidscount.org).

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