

## Report: Florida ranks near bottom in health and education of children

By Margie Menzel The News Service of Florida TALLAHASSEE — A new report Wednesday shows Florida trailing most other states in the health and education of its children — with an especial

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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.

In Southwest Florida, more children are living in poverty now than ever, with 12,397 impoverished children in Collier and 21,460 in Lee County. The data is for 2009 and in both counties represents about a 2 percent increase in the number of children living in poverty, according to KidsCount.

When it comes to school drop out rates, 373 Collier students dropped in 2010, but that's a steady decline from prior years, where 544 students dropped out in 2008. In Lee, the drop out rate has essentially held steady 411 students quitting school in 2010.

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.

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

Staff writer Liz Freeman contributed to this story.

