

New report: Recession harms more Florida kids

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 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 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 employment or ability to cover their housing costs.

The findings were not a shock to Cliff Smith, president of the United Way of Lee, Hendry and Glades counties. Local organizations helping the needy continue to see families who are asking for help for the first time.

"We have seen an ever-increasing flow of families," Smith said. "The numbers would most likely reflect that Florida and our community were some of the hardest-hit areas in the country because of the recession."

He pointed to collaboration through programs like the Bridges, a partnership between Children's Home Society of Florida and Lee schools, to serve families that are homeless or in danger of losing shelter. It assigns a social worker to help bring stability to a family and minimize longer-term consequences for the children, such as falling behind in school, Smith said. It has served more than 30 families since it began in March, he said.

"What we're seeing in our community is a recognition that to truly help children and families, you have to look at the bigger issues," he said.

Janet Bartos, executive director of the Lee County Homeless Coalition, said local organizations pull together to help

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homeless children. However, in Lee, it's difficult to secure affordable housing for low-income families and jobs.

"We're lacking resources, obviously, but everybody does step up to the plate," she said. "People are not just asking for shelter. They say, 'I need shelter and a job.'"

But not everyone asks for help. She noted families often struggle under the radar of organizations.

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."

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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.

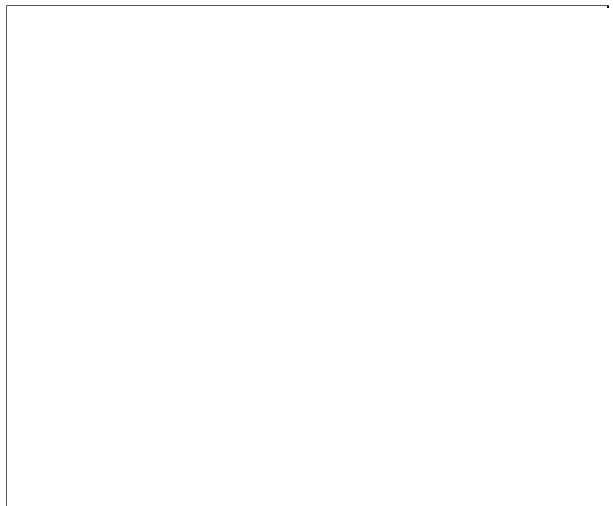
David Wilkins, secretary of the Florida Department of Children and Families, agreed his agency is seeing poor children at risk for future difficulties.

"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 Kids Count report had good news for Florida. The number of uninsured children has dropped slightly, to 500,000. Students are doing a bit better in reading and math, although 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

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areas.

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?"

The Kids Count Data Book is available at datacenter.kidscount.org. For details on Florida, visit floridakidscount.org.

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