

Study: Well being of Florida children lags

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The well-being of Florida's children is among the worst in the nation, according to a report released Wednesday by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

The annual Kids Count report ranked the state 44th in the economic well-being of it's children, 38th in their health outcomes and 35th in educational performance. Overall, the state ranked 38th, down from last year's ranking of 36.

In addition, the study said, the number of Florida children in poverty increased 28 percent from 2005 to 2010. The study considered factors such as whether a child's parents are employed or can pay for housing.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a nonprofit focused on disadvantaged children.

Child advocates in Palm Beach County and statewide said they were not surprised by the results, since a weakened economy almost always impacts children.

"Clearly, this important analysis shows children in Florida have suffered — and continue to suffer — during these tough economic times," said Tana Ebbole, chief executive officer of the Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County. "Too many are living in poverty while their parents struggle to find work and keep a roof over their heads," Ebbole added.

David Wilkins, secretary of the Florida Department of Children and Families, said some of the percentages in the study reflect the harsh economic realities of many Floridians. A "domino effect" is created when children live in poverty and end up performing poorly in school and abusing drugs, he said.

"Particularly in Florida, where we were devastated by the housing market and then the inability to get out of this economic slump, it has a direct impact on children in poverty," Wilkins said.

Florida scored worse than the national average in a handful of categories, the study showed. In 2010, 23 percent of children statewide lived in poverty. More than 30 percent of them had parents who lacked secure employment, up from 28 percent in 2008. In addition, 49 percent of Floridians saw their housing costs increase to 30 percent or more, up from 42 percent of Floridians in 2005.

“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, 15 years down the road? We don’t know.”

Florida did improve in a few categories.

The number of children in Florida not attending preschool in 2008-2010 was 51 percent, 1 percent better than in 2005-2007. Also, the percentage of high school students not graduating on time dropped from 36 in 2005-2006 to 31 in 2008-2009. The state ranked 35th nationwide in education.

In two categories that had 2011 data available, 65 percent of fourth graders were not proficient in reading, compared to 70 percent in 2005. In addition, 72 percent of eighth graders were not proficient in math, a slight improvement from 74 percent in 2005.

Christine Koehn, vice president of community impact for United Way of Palm Beach County, said Florida’s low education ratings are “tough to see but unfortunately not terribly shocking, if you look at the indicators in our community.”

“Palm Beach County has a high unemployment rate and therefore many individuals with limited or no access to healthcare and increased food insecurity,” Koehn said, adding that these issues can prevent a child from being successful in school.

Florida also saw slight improvements in health issues. Although the state ranked 38th nationwide, there was a decrease in the number of kids without health insurance — from 18 percent in 2008 to 13 percent in 2010. The percentages, however, were still below the national average of 8 percent.

The News Service of Florida contributed to this story.

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