

Study: More Florida children live in poverty than decade ago; region mirrors trend

By LIZ FREEMAN

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NAPLES — Volunteers at Southwest Florida food banks aren't getting a breather. Neither are case workers who review families' finances for assistance.

The number of children living in poor neighborhoods has increased dramatically during the last decade in Florida and elsewhere, according to a new report, set for release today, by [the Annie E. Casey Foundation](#).

The charitable organization in Baltimore, Md., focuses on public policies for vulnerable children and supports human-service reforms.

A snapshot of Southwest Florida found that 5,382 children in Collier County and 10,061 children in Lee County lived in distressed neighborhoods in 2010, said Susan Weitzel, with Florida KidsCount, the state office for the foundation.

It's worth noting that living in a distressed neighborhood doesn't mean that all of the children are living in poverty, she said. That's because a distressed subdivision or multifamily complex could be in the same general neighborhood as a wealthy one.

In Florida, 341,000 children reside in neighborhoods where at least 30 percent of the residents are impoverished. That's based on federal poverty guidelines of an income not exceeding \$22,000 for a family of four.

The findings, based on U.S. Census data, means 9 percent of the state's 4 million children are living in high-poverty neighborhoods. That's an increase from 7 percent since 2000 when 267,000 Florida children lived in distressed neighborhoods.

Still, Florida's rate of 9 percent is below the U.S. average that 11 percent of the nation's children live in impoverished neighborhoods. That means 7.8 million children live in distressed neighborhoods out of the U.S. population of 74 million children.

Directors of social service agencies in Southwest Florida say local youngsters and their families continue to come in droves for food, utility and rent assistance.

The case load at St. Vincent de Paul Society in Naples has gone up 35 percent in recent months, said Paul Brigham, the district's executive director.

"We saw over 3,000 children at St. Vincent de Paul needing food, needing clothing and rental assistance," Brigham said. "Of those 3,000 kids, 2,400 of them got food and that

is still growing."

The numbers were for the first quarter of the year, which began last Oct. 1.

"I was just astounded by the first-quarter (numbers)," he said. "Even though some people are getting back to work, and that is just us."

The number of homeless children in Collier is still alarming and is on an upswing, said Armando Galella, district director of Catholic Charities. That includes kids who are living in motels, living with people who aren't relatives, and living with their families in homes of other families.

Based on that broad definition, there were 1,407 homeless children enrolled in Collier public schools during the 2010-11 school year, a dramatic increase from 813 students in 2009, according to the Collier County School District.

"It's unbelievable. There's just too much out there," he said.

Despite the achievements of the [Naples Children and Education Foundation](#), raising \$107 million since 2001 and benefitting 150,000 children locally, there still is a long way to go, said Todd Foege, acting director of NCEF, sponsors of the Naples Winter Wine Festival.

"We are by no means out of the woods," Foege said. "To assume we are even remotely out of the woods is naïve. There is still a huge element of underemployment. It is often missed."

About 61 percent of the students in Collier public schools are on the free- or reduced-lunch program, according to the district. That's 28,817 students out of the total 43,735 students.

When NCEF in 2010 updated a prior child well-being study, University of Florida researchers determined 1,100 children had episodes of homelessness during the year, he said.

"Families are doubled up or tripled up (in housing)," he said, adding the children may not fit the classic image of a homeless child on an urban street but their situation is just as bad.

The Casey foundation's report is based on the Census Bureau's American Community Survey, which found nearly all states saw the number of children in high-poverty neighborhoods climb.

The states with the highest rates of children in high-poverty neighborhoods are Mississippi with 23 percent, New Mexico at 20 percent, Louisiana at 18 percent, Texas at 17 percent and Arizona at 16 percent.

"Kids in these high-poverty areas are at risk for health and development challenges in almost every aspect of their lives, from education to their chances for economic success as adults," said Laura Speer, associate director for policy reform and data for

the Casey foundation.

The Collier Health Department agrees and it is challenging, said Stephanie Vick, nursing director of community health.

"We find when poverty levels increase and people struggle to cover their basic needs including shelter and food, they are less likely to prioritize health care," she said. "This results in our seeing more pregnant women, infants and children in our community with compounded health care and social service needs."



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