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From infants to teenagers, hard times hit kids the hardest with poverty up in South Florida

By Donna Gehrke-White, Sun Sentinel

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South Florida children have been among the hardest hit by the Great Recession: Poverty among those 18 and under increased 16 percent in five years — nearly 15,000 more poor kids in Broward and Palm Beach counties, according to data released Wednesday by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

In [Palm Beach County](#), the number of children in poverty was up 32 percent from 2005 through 2009, the foundation found through analyzing county Census Bureau data.

Almost three years later, those numbers are most certainly higher. The Florida Agency for Health Care Administration reported a 60 percent increase in the number of poor children on Medicaid in Broward and Palm Beach counties since 2007.

In Hollywood, the soup kitchen at the Jubilee Center of South Broward now sees mothers coming in with babies and other young children to get a hot meal — Tuesday it was a mom with 4-year-old triplets, said executive director Joyce Curtis.

She tells her staff not to cry, because the children don't realize the desperate circumstances they are in. Instead, workers serve them ice cream as a treat and take them to a more festive area with stuffed animals. "But it is heart breaking," Curtis said.

Overall, Florida ranked 44th out of 50 states for the economic well-being of children, according to the foundation's 2012 KIDS COUNT Data Book.

The Sunshine State has made progress improving the lives of children, with infant mortality down and free preschool education offered for 4-year-olds. But the recession has made life more difficult for many youngsters. Nearly half live with families facing a high housing cost burden by spending more than 30 percent of their monthly household income on rent, mortgage payments, taxes, insurance, or related expenses, the foundation found.

Many Florida families with children are faced with smaller paychecks or layoffs, said Susan Weitzel, Florida KIDS COUNT director. They're coping by sharing expenses with some parents moving into other relatives' homes, Weitzel said.

"A lot can be done to strengthen communities so that supports are in place to ensure children and families have a greater chance of success," she added.

Families continue to flood 211 hotlines throughout South Florida, asking for assistance to pay rent or mortgages, said Patrice Schroeder of 211 Palm Beach/Treasure Coast.

A few families are turning out teenagers to fend for themselves, Schroeder said. "There's a lot of couch surfing going on," she said, "with teenagers asking friends for help."

Added Weitzel: "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?"

Florida also has more than half a million children without health coverage — although those numbers decreased

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modestly, Weitzel said.

Her nonprofit foundation's report found some good news: The number of teenage moms, high school drop outs and delinquency cases, for example, were down in South Florida. So was infant mortality.

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