National child welfare survey examines recession

By CRISTINA SILVA
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Karla Washington worries how she will afford new school uniforms for her five-year-old daughter.

Washington, an undergraduate student, earns less than $11,000 a year from a part-time university job. The salary must cover food, rent, health care, child care and the occasional splurge on a Blue's Clues item for her only child.

"My biggest fear is not providing my daughter with everything that she needs to be a balanced child, to be independent, to be safe, to feel like she is of value," said Washington, 41.

Washington's economic woes are seen throughout Nevada, where the nation's highest unemployment and foreclosure rates have combined to devastate families and empty neighborhoods and construction yards.

A national study on child well-being to be published Wednesday found that child poverty increased in 38 states from 2000 to 2009. As a result, 14.7 million children, 20 percent, were poor in 2009. That represents a 2.5 million increase from 2000, when 17 percent of the nation's youth lived in low-income homes.

In the foundation's first examination of the impact of the recession on the nation's children, the researchers concluded that low-income children will likely suffer academically, economically and socially long after their parents have recovered.

The research by the Annie E. Casey Foundation found that Nevada had the highest rate of children whose parents are unemployed and underemployed. The state is also home to the most children affected by foreclosures - 13 percent of all Silver State babies, toddlers and teenagers have been kicked out of their homes because of an unpaid mortgage, the study found.

"People who grew up in a financially secure situation find it easier to succeed in life, they are more likely to graduate from high school, more likely to graduate from college and these are things that will lead to greater success in life," said Stephen Brown, director of the Center for Business and Economic Research at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. "What we are looking at is a cohort of kids who as they become adults may be less able to contribute to the growth of the economy. It could go on for multiple generations."
"We are just extremely challenged given the economic hardships that we have," she said.

Nevada, meanwhile, has long had a challenging record on child issues because of its historically low-performing schools. The Kids Count survey found 11 percent of Nevada teens were not in school and had not graduated from high school in 2009, the worst rate in the nation. New Hampshire was best at 3 percent.

At least 34 percent of Nevada's children were living in families with both parents not working full-time in 2009, the largest increase in the nation, according to the survey. Nevada also saw the largest rates of children living with at least one unemployed parent, followed by Rhode Island, Oregon and Kentucky. North Dakota, Nebraska and South Dakota had the best rates.

Overall, the percent of children living in families in which no parent had full-time employment increased from 27 percent in 2008 to 31 percent in 2009. Black children were nearly twice as likely as white children to have an unemployed parent.

Washington, the Las Vegas mother, is poised to graduate from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas next year and hopes to pursue a career in human resources. She tries not to fret over the challenges of securing full-time employment in this job market.

She dreams of stashing away a small savings nest for her daughter, in case of an emergency.

"I want to be able to say that she is OK, because right now I can't say that," Washington said.