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National child welfare survey examines recession

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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 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.

Across the nation, the research by the Annie E. Casey Foundation 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.

"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 led 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."

The annual survey monitored by policy makers across the nation concludes that children from low-income families are more likely to be raised in unstable environments and change schools than their wealthier peers. As a result, they are less likely to be gainfully employed as adults.

There are other social costs. Economically disadvantaged children can result in reduced economic output, higher health expenditures and increased criminal justice costs for society, the survey concludes. The research is based on data from many sources, including the Mortgage Bankers Association, National Delinquency Survey and U.S. Census Bureau.

"Even if you don't care about kids and all you care about is your own well-being, then you ought to be concerned," said Patrick McCarthy, president of the Baltimore, Md.-based charity. "... We've got to think about what kind of state, what kind of country we can expect to have if we are not investing in the success of our children."

The report found some bright spots.

In the two decades since researchers began compiling the annual report, infant mortalities, child and teen deaths and high school dropout rates have declined. But the number of unhealthy babies have increased, and there were far more children living in low-income families.

Programs such as food stamps, unemployment insurance and foreclosure meditation have acted like a dam against the flood of poverty, McCarthy said, but that assistance has been threatened by federal and state government