Study: Florida 36th in U.S. in kids' health, well-being

By Ana M. Valdes, The Palm Beach Post

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A new study of children's health and well-being released on Wednesday shows Florida's youngest residents are among the most severely affected by the economic downturn, with more than a half-million children and teenagers impacted by their parents' unemployment and home foreclosures.

An estimated 626,000 children in Florida, about 10 percent, have been affected by foreclosures since 2007, ranking Florida second in the nation in that category, according to the 2011 Kids Count Data Book.

The report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation also found that 12 percent of Florida's children were living in a household where at least one parent was unemployed.

The study found an 11-percent increase between 2000 and 2009 in Florida children who live in poverty. Nationwide, the child poverty rate increased 18 percent between 2000 and 2009, meaning 2.4 million more children are living below the federal poverty line.

The packed emergency housing shelters and the long list of applicants for the housing program at The Lord's Place in West Palm Beach clearly reflect the findings of this data count, said Executive Director Diana Stanley.

"Because of the economy and unemployment, and because moms and dads can't find jobs, we have a brand-new generation of very young people experiencing homelessness for the first time in their lives," she said.

Stanley, who supervises a handful of outreach programs for Palm Beach County's homeless and unemployed residents, said the Kids Count Data Book should encourage communities and nonprofits to make children a priority.

"No child should ever be fearful of where they are going to sleep at night," Stanley said.

The findings should motivate communities to continue funding social service projects that help these children, said Susan Weitzel, director of Florida Kids Count at the University of South Florida Department of Child & Family Studies in Tampa.

"With Florida ranking as the state with the second-highest percentage of children affected by foreclosure..."