



Posted: Aug. 4, 2010

Kids suffer as Michigan slips deeper into poverty

BY JANE ZEHNDER-MERRELL

When people talk about the recession and the tough job market, it's usually the plight of unemployed adults that springs to mind.

But children in those families are the ones who may suffer lifelong consequences from poverty, driven by the worst recession since the 1930s. The ill effects have been worsened by the erosion of prevention and intervention programs designed to help vulnerable families through tough times.

The latest Kids Count Data Book from the Annie E. Casey Foundation shows Michigan slipping from 27th place to 30th when it comes to overall child well-being.

Our economic freefall clearly has left its mark on children. Michigan ranks 32nd (No. 1 is the best rank) for children living in poverty. In 2000, Michigan was below the national average for child poverty with a rate of 14%. But by 2008, it jumped to 19%, rising above the national average. Michigan had the third-highest jump in the child poverty rate in the country during that period.

That means nearly a half-million kids, or about one in every five children, live in poverty, with higher rates for minority children. Poverty level is about \$17,000 a year for a family of three.

Our worst ranking is related to our dismal job situation. Michigan was in the bottom 10 (No. 44) for children in families with secure parental employment. In Michigan, 31% of children lived in families where no parent has full-time, year-round employment, compared with a national average of 27%.

Another area where Michigan lags behind most

other states is infant mortality. Our rate (nearly eight infants out of every 1,000 live births die before their first birthday) puts us at 40th in the country. Again, minority infants are at the highest risk.

These alarming statistics should be a call to arms for our state's leaders. We should be buoying up our children and making sure vulnerable families have the lifelines they need to navigate these choppy economic waters.

Yet programs aimed at helping babies survive have been slashed. Family, maternal and child health programs included in the Michigan Department of Community Health budget have fallen from \$60 million in 2002 to \$30 million this fiscal year.

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In addition, this year's budget reflects cuts of \$4.2 million in family planning, \$1.7 million in infant mortality reduction, \$1 million from the Nurse Family Partnership program, which offers help to new mothers in high-risk communities, and \$100,000 from the Fetal Infant Mortality Review.

We know that the effects of poverty are lifelong,

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