



February 8, 2011
Contact: Andy Heller
(810) 399-4997
aheller@ecic4kids.org

Childhood poverty and neglect rates continue to climb in Michigan

Advocates: Kids Count report shows need to focus on, invest in state's youngest learners

LANSING – Poverty among children has worsened dramatically in Michigan since 2000, according to a new report, with more than a quarter of very young children (0-5) and a fifth of all children now living below the poverty line.

The Kids Count in Michigan Data Book 2010: The Education Connection – released today by the Michigan League for Human Services – details a startling rise in childhood poverty between 2000 and 2009.

In 2000, 17 percent of all children birth to five lived in low-income households. By 2009, that rate had increased to 27 percent. Poverty rates are much higher for children of color, according to the report, with nearly half of all African American children and a third of Hispanic children living in low-income settings.

The report also indicated a sharp rise – 25 percent – in the rate of confirmed victims of childhood abuse and neglect between 2000 and 2009. A federal report finds that 90 percent of the cases are due to neglect, often made worse by poverty.

“This is a call to action if ever there was one,” said Judy Y. Samelson, chief executive officer of the Early Childhood Investment Corp., a public/private initiative working to improve early childhood factors in Michigan. “This is the state’s future workforce we’re talking about, and the research is clear that years spent in poverty during childhood affect education and employment.”

In recent years, high unemployment, declining wages, and increasing poverty have resulted in declining revenues available for many programs and services that support the education and physical and emotional health of children, including subsidies to low-income working parents to pay for quality child care, Samelson noted.

“This is precisely the wrong time to make any further cuts to the support system for children in Michigan,” Samelson said. “Fortunately, we have a new administration in Lansing that seems to understand that we can’t rebuild the state’s economy by allowing another generation of children to fall through the cracks.”

In making the case for early childhood investments as good business, Samelson referenced a new book - “Investing in Kids: Early Childhood Programs and Local Economic Development” - by Timothy J. Bartik, senior economist for the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

In the book, Bartik finds that early childhood programs and business incentives lead to similar increases in per-capita income – about \$3 for every \$1 of investment, depending on the specific program.

Bartik also estimates that universal preschool would cost Michigan \$300 million a year but would also increase earnings by Michigan workers by roughly \$834 million.

“Viewed in that light, the state budget deficit can be seen as an opportunity,” said Samelson. “If we invest in our youngest learners, we invest in the well-being of Michigan’s economic future.”

The report was released by the Kids Count in Michigan project. It is a collaboration between the Michigan League for Human Services, which researches and writes the report, and Michigan’s Children, which works with advocates statewide to disseminate the findings in the report. Both organizations are nonpartisan, nonprofit advocacy groups concerned with the well-being of children and their families.

The Kids Count in Michigan project is part of a broad national effort to improve conditions for children and their families. Funding for the project is provided by The Annie E. Casey Foundation, The Detroit-based Skillman Foundation, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan Foundation and local United Ways.

The report examines data trends in 15 areas and ranks Michigan’s 83 counties based on the recent rates. The theme of this year’s report is connecting the dots between education and other areas of children’s lives, according to Jane Zehnder-Merrell, director of the Kids Count in Michigan project at the Michigan League for Human Services.

“We can’t look at our education system in isolation. Michigan must make sure children are healthy and have adequate economic support and that a strong child welfare system is in place to protect children,” Zehnder-Merrell said. “Unfortunately, the data show that support systems are strained and overloaded - we’re not keeping up with the needs of kids.”

For study details, visit www.milhs.org.

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The Early Childhood Investment Corporation is a public/private initiative working to restructure Michigan’s investment in children from birth to five through state and local community efforts. For more information about ECIC and its efforts, go to <http://greatstartforkids.org/>