

February 8, 2011

<http://detnews.com/article/20110208/SCHOOLS/102080334>

Poverty, abuse surge among Michigan children

Annual 'Kids Count' paints dire picture of economy's impact

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The Detroit News

Lansing— Nearly half of Michigan's public school students qualified for free and reduced-price lunches in 2009, just one troubling statistic on how the economic crisis has affected the state's youngest residents.

The rate of those who qualified jumped 26 percent in three years, rising to almost 46 percent of children in 2009 from 36 percent in 2006, according to the annual "Kids Count in Michigan" report released today. In Detroit, 81 percent qualified.

The lunches, funded by the federal government, are designed for students whose families have gross incomes below \$40,200 for a two-parent family of four.

"Sometimes you hear where parents eat less so they can provide for the kids," said Terri Stangl, executive director of the Center for Civil Justice, a nonprofit law firm.

Macomb County showed the largest year-to-year increase: 39 percent in 2009, compared with 32 percent in 2008.

The report also shows a 25 percent increase in the rate of confirmed victims of abuse and neglect between 2000 and 2009.

For child advocates, the report highlights the need for the state to spend more money on early childhood learning, starting with prenatal care and preschool support.

"We can't ignore the huge role economic security, health and personal safety play in a child's ability to learn," said Jack Kresnak, president and CEO of Michigan's Children, a Lansing-based advocacy group.

"Children with rumbling tummies and abused children worried about hiding fresh injuries can't give their full attention to their lessons."

Rates alarming

The report found childhood poverty increased at alarming rates for African-American and Hispanic children, with 1 out of 2 and 1 out of 3, respectively, living in poverty in 2009.

"What this means for these kids is that their struggle continues and their hope for breaking the generational cycle of poverty is even a bigger struggle," said Marcella Wilson, CEO of Matrix Human Services, which feeds and serves 1,500 Detroit children in its Head Start program.

The report examined data from the Michigan Department of Community Health and other state and federal agencies.

The report also indicated that more than a quarter of Michigan's children depended on food stamps in 2009, compared with 10 percent in 2000.

The report highlighted some improvements: Deaths of children 1-4 years old declined by 17.3 percent in 2006-08.

The number of high school dropouts fell 25 percent from 2007-09.

The percentage of fourth- and seventh-graders who fell below proficient in MEAP reading tests fell by 15.9 percent and 18.0 percent, respectively.

The Michigan League of Human Services, based in Lansing, compiled the report with the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a charity dedicated to aiding disadvantaged children. The full report can be viewed at <http://www.milhs.org>">www.milhs.org.

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