



## Kent County kids report: One in five live in poverty

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By **Matt Vande Bunte | The Grand Rapids Press**

GRAND RAPIDS – One in five Kent County children now lives in poverty and it's causing a bevy of social problems, according to an annual data compilation. The groups that package the **Kids Count in Michigan Data Book 2011** claim the statistics show a need for more public funding of social services, not less.

More than 32,000 children in Kent County live in poverty. Though lower, numbers in Allegan and Ottawa counties are rising and add another 12,000 kids to the local tally.

"That's a lot of children," said Sue Toman, chief operating officer of **Family Futures**, a family support organization in Grand Rapids. "(Poverty) has such a spillover effect in terms of child abuse and neglect and in terms of education and health. If that's present in a child's life, there are repercussions. There's definitely a correlation.

"These stats provide great impetus for us to increase our capacity to serve families."

For example, the rate of child abuse and neglect in Kent County nearly doubled from 2000 to 2010 as the number of poor kids continued to rise. In Allegan County, the rate of abuse and neglect nearly tripled during that time, while the share of students eligible for free and reduced-price school meals almost doubled since 2005. In Ottawa County, the poverty rate rose 47 percent in the last half of the last decade.

The increases come as government safety nets get clipped by wilting public budgets in a down economy, resulting in "a double whammy" for families in need, Toman said.

"This is devastating for children," said Jack Kresnak, president and CEO of **Michigan's Children**, a Lansing-based non-profit that teamed on the report with the Michigan League for Human Services. "When the Legislature votes to



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Susan Chang, left, of Catholic Charities, meets with Shanna VandenBosch and her son Bryden, who are taking part in Healthy Start, a home visiting program for families with infants and toddlers. Family support programs like this are crucial to Michigan's future, child advocates say.

cut spending today, what they're actually doing is voting for increased spending years down the road. We're actually being penny wise and pound foolish.

"If the governor wants to move the needles on childhood poverty or infant mortality, then we need to increase the supports not just for health care but for the entire family. We're leaving lots of children behind and we need every child to succeed in life in order to become productive taxpaying citizens."

The latest edition of the Kids Count in Michigan Data Book, released today, focuses on the role of social and economic factors in child health. Among the improvements statewide: the rate of births to teens, teen deaths and high school dropouts all declined. And fewer students were deemed not proficient in math.

Worsening trends included the rate of children confirmed as victims of abuse and neglect, which rose 34 percent statewide over the decade to 32,500 confirmed victims in 2010. Also, 46.5 percent of public school children now qualify for free and reduced-price lunches, up from 36.2 percent in 2006, according to the report.

The share of children living in poverty was 23 percent in 2009, up from 14 percent in 2000.

"It's really making us work together," said Megan Koops-Fisher, director of the **Great Start Collaborative in Allegan County**, where one in six children now live in poverty, up from about one in nine in 2005. "It's making (family-support organizations) join together to see how we can serve Allegan County children better."

Kent County ranks 25th in the state for childhood poverty. The county's best rating in the report was 9th for teen deaths with a rate of 45 per 1,000 teens, less than the 55.6 per 1,000 statewide. The county's worst rank: 73rd for high school dropouts at almost 13 percent.

The poverty rate in Ottawa County is third-lowest in the state at just over 10 percent. And the county ranks 2nd in Michigan for the fewest confirmed victims of abuse or neglect: less than 5 per 1,000 kids. The statewide count is almost 14 per 1,000

## BY THE NUMBERS

### How children fare in local counties

**\* Allegan:** Population of children, 29,224 (37.8 percent insured by Medicaid or MI Child)

-Low birthweight babies, 6.6 percent, 22nd rank in state

-Births to teens, 32.6 per 1,000, 38th rank

-High school dropouts, 7 percent, 27th rank

-High school students not proficient in math, 43.1 percent, 16th rank

-Confirmed cases of abuse and neglect, 17.8 per 1,000 children, 47th rank

-Eligible for free or reduced-price school meals, 41 percent, 17th rank

-Living in poverty, 16.2 percent, 15th rank

**\* Kent:** Population of children, 158,134 (40.8 percent insured by Medicaid or MI Child)

-Low birthweight babies, 7.4 percent, 44th rank in state

-Births to teens, 40.8 per 1,000, 58th rank

-High school dropouts, 12.8 percent, 73rd rank

-High school students not proficient in math, 42.3 percent, 14th rank

-Confirmed cases of abuse and neglect, 15.6 per 1,000 children, 38th rank

-Eligible for free or reduced-price school meals, 47 percent, 26th rank

-Living in poverty, 20.3, 25th rank

**\* Ottawa:** Population of children, 68,737 (28 percent insured by Medicaid or MI Child)

-Low birthweight babies, 6.5 percent, 18th rank in state

kids.

But while that may give “the impression that we have low need in our community,” the numbers are rising, said Jan Shangle, director of **Great Start of Ottawa County**. Child poverty increased 47 percent from 2005 to 2009, and the share of students eligible for free or reduced-price school meals increased from 27 percent to 37 percent.

Students are eligible based on a **sliding scale of income based on family size** - \$27,214 for a family of two, for example, or \$69,616 for a family of eight.

“Ottawa has seen this tremendous change in trajectory,” Shangle said. “It’s a community that is scrambling trying to meet need that is increasing faster than the service sector can keep up.”

The League for Human Services will use the data to push lawmakers for more funding of food stamps, welfare, unemployment benefits and other sources of support.

“The banks were bailed out, but now when we have budget talks it’s all about how we can’t afford to have these (social support) programs go on forever,” said Jane Zehnder-Merrell, Kids Count in Michigan director. “Instead of helping families we are actually hindering families from meeting the needs of their children in times of economic crisis.

“If we don’t provide a solid socioeconomic foundation for children, they’re going to have 50 years of not being productive adults.”

Zehnder-Merrell said the new Kids Count report shows “the extent to which we’ve privatized paying for the poor.” Public funding or not, local support organizations will persevere, said Toman, the Family Futures executive.

“There’s a rich community of churches and non-profits (in West Michigan),” she said. “It may not be the government, but we will find a way to meet a family’s need.

Email **Matt Vande Bunte** , or follow him on **Twitter**.

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- Births to teens, 21.4 per 1,000, 15th rank
- High school dropouts, 6.7 percent, 25th rank
- High school students not proficient in math, 30.4 percent, 1st rank
- Confirmed cases of abuse and neglect, 4.8 per 1,000 children, 2nd rank
- Eligible for free or reduced-price school meals, 37 percent, 8th rank
- Living in poverty, 10.9 percent, 3rd rank

#### **\* State average**

- Low birthweight babies, 8.5 percent
- Births to teens, 33.3 per 1,000
- High school dropouts, 11.1 percent
- High school students not proficient in math, 49.6 percent
- Confirmed cases of abuse and neglect, 13.8 per 1,000
- Eligible for free or reduced-price school meals, 46.5 percent
- Living in poverty, 22.2 percent

Source: Kids Count in Michigan Data Book 2011