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Study: Almost Half Of K-12 Students Eligible For Free Or Reduced Lunch



Submitted by wendyz@michigan... on Wed, 01/25/2012 - 2:45pm

Reflecting the prolonged recession in Michigan, almost half of the public school students in the state in 2010 were eligible for free or reduced price lunch, according to the annual Kids Count in Michigan report.

The report, titled "Health Matters," focuses on child health and how social and economic factors play into that.

It found that every county in the state saw the percentages of students eligible for free or reduced lunch rise. It ranged from 21 percent of students in Livingston County to 93 percent of the students in Lake County.

The annual report is a collaboration between the Michigan League for Human Services, which researches and writes the report, and Michigan's Children.

Another key finding in the report was that child abuse and neglect cases in Michigan increased by 34 percent in the past decade.

In 2010, about 32,500 children in the state were confirmed as victims of abuse or neglect.

"The findings show that children across Michigan are still suffering the fallout from our long recession," Jane Zehnder-Merrell, the Kids Count director said in a statement. "Poverty in Michigan is as big a threat to our children today as polio was to a previous generation. Fortunately, we can do something about this. We know that public policy can improve children's social and economic environment."

Poverty in the state increases the potential for neglect, and it also means children living in those conditions are less likely to graduate, and will have a greater risk of health problems, including heart disease and obesity.

The report showed that child poverty was higher in the state than the country for all groups except Asians in 2010.

From 2000 to 2009, the percentage of children living in poverty increased from 14 percent to 23 percent. And children living in extreme poverty, defined as less than \$11,000 a year for a family of four, increased from 5 percent to 11 percent.

In 2010, nearly two of every five children in Michigan depended on Medicaid for their health care, which represented more than half of the program's participants in the state.

"The impact of high unemployment and declining wages is leaving its mark on a generation of children," Ms. Zehnder-Merrell wrote. "Unfortunately, policymakers have cut family supports aimed at blunting the impact of the economic downturn on kids."

The League pointed to the cutting of the Earned Income Tax Credit, stricter limits on cash assistance, asset limits on food assistance and reducing unemployment from 26 to 20 weeks as policies the state changed last year that are hurting families across the state.



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"The best public policies must address the whole child from cradle to career, and this data can help guide these policies," wrote Michele Corey, vice president for programs at Michigan's Children.

In the report, nine indicators of child well being improved and six worsened.

Those that improved included a lower teen birth rate, fewer teen deaths and fewer high school dropouts.

The teen birth rate declined by 21 percent from 2000 to 2009, from 42 births per 1,000 teens to 33 births per 1,000. That put the state 13th among the nation for having lower teen birth rates.

The state's teen death rate also improved by 13 percent, from 64 deaths per 100,000 teens ages 15-19 to 56 deaths.

The dropout rate declined from 15 percent of the class of 2007 to 11 percent of the class of 2010, meaning more than 15,000 students in the graduating class of 2010 did not receive a diploma.

And while the dropout rate has declined, it has not led to an increase in on-time graduation rates.

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