



Another view: Smart use of our resources will continue to make a difference

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By **Bernie Eng** | beng1@mlive.com

By Gilda Z. Jacobs and Jack Kresnak

Recent Kids Count findings include some rays of hope. When we collectively put our minds to a task, we can make a difference.

We can see that in teen outcomes. As a state, we've reduced teen deaths with a graduated driver's license, we've helped bring down teen births with a multi-pronged approach in high-risk communities and we've improved drop-out rates due to across-the-board strategic efforts to keep kids in school.

These interventions can and do make a difference. We can see that in the 13 percent drop in the rate of teen deaths and 21 percent drop in the rate of teen births over the past decade. Drop-out rates fell to 11 percent in 2010, a 27 percent improvement since 2007.

In Genesee County there was a 38 percent improvement in the rate of teen deaths, a 17 percent improvement in the rate of births to teens and a 31 percent improvement in the drop-out rate.

The Kids Count findings, however, portend trouble ahead with an alarming growth in poverty – nearly one in every four kids lives in poverty. There was a related jump in the statewide rate of child abuse and neglect, up 34 percent over the past decade. In Genesee County, child poverty stood at 30 percent while the rate of child abuse and neglect grew 11 percent over the decade.

Another worrisome trend is the doubling of the percentage of Michigan children (11 percent) living in extreme poverty – about \$11,000 or less a year for a family of four.

These findings cry out for a public response to make sure children have the foundation they need to become capable adults and skilled workers. Unfortunately, state public policy has been moving in the opposite and, we say, wrong direction.

Family supports have been cut at the wrong time. We've reduced the Michigan Earned Income Tax Credit from 20



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percent to 6 percent of a federal credit. This benefit goes to low-income working families, already paying a disproportionate share of their income in taxes, and is generally spent on basic needs – car repair, appliances and catching up on rent and utilities.

Despite a record loss of jobs in the state, the traditional period of unemployment benefits has been cut from 26 to 20 weeks. We've also instituted an asset test for food assistance that particularly targets the newly unemployed. These supports can mean the difference in making a mortgage payment or losing your home.

In addition, for the poorest families who qualify with monthly income under \$814 for a family of three (well below the poverty level) we've ended cash assistance and cut an annual back-to-school clothing allowance for most children who were receiving it.

Restoring these supports isn't just about doing what is right for the most vulnerable in our community -- it's about being smart with our precious resources.

Consider that:

- Every \$1 invested in high quality early care and education for low-income children saves up to \$16 on welfare, criminal justice, special education and other social expenses.
- Children who succeed in school generate four times more tax revenue as adults than the cost of the programs that helped them succeed.
- Each \$1 invested in services to families of infants and toddlers at high risk of abuse or neglect saves \$6 that would be spent on the child protection system.

Investing in children, particularly those most challenged by their circumstances, must be a key part of rebuilding and strengthening Michigan's economy.

We know that creating a bright future for Michigan and for the Flint area begins with providing the best start for all of the children. After all, they will be our future.

Gilda Z. Jacobs is president and CEO of the Michigan League for Human Services and Jack Kresnak is president and CEO of Michigan's Children. The Kids Count in Michigan project is a partnership between the two groups.

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