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Child wellness declining in Hillsdale County

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LANSING — The overall wellbeing for children in Hillsdale County has worsened according to a report released this week by Kids Count in Michigan. The report states that out of the 82 counties in the state, Hillsdale ranks 61st overall in the study that was conducted using numbers from 2005 to 2011. While the state as a whole saw child poverty increase by 28 percent, Hillsdale County saw the numbers jump by 33 percent.

"Some of these kids are living in very drastic levels of poverty," said Jane Zehnder-Merrell, Kids Count in Michigan project director at the Michigan League for Public Policy.

Even more shocking was the amount of confirmed cases of abuse and neglect. In Hillsdale County the increase skyrocketed by 90 percent, nearly doubling the amount of cases. Zehnder-Merrell said there is a clear correlation between neglect or abuse and a family's economic standing.

"It's closely related to poverty, as families lose their shelter and are living in a car, it's eligible (to be considered abuse)," Zehnder-Merrell said, before adding that in most cases the family is not going out of their way to neglect their kids, but because they cannot afford everyday necessities, it is considered neglect.

However, another concerning number was the amount of families investigated for abuse and neglect by the state. The amount in Hillsdale County (141) was nearly double the statewide rate of 73 children per 1,000.

The report suggested four recommendations that would help improve conditions for children in the state; Investing in prevention, improving educational opportunities, addressing health inequities and maintaining public systems to help families in the weak economy.

The information was gathered through numerous state organizations and summarized in 15 different categories to form the report. Conducted by the Kids Count in Michigan project, the Data Book is a collaboration between Michigan League for Public Policy and Michigan's Children. Both companies are nonprofit, nonpartisan parties.

"The release of this critical report is the start of a conversation. Each year, the data point clearly to programs and policies to improve the lives of all children, youth and families in Michigan," said Michele Corey, interim president and CEO of Michigan's Children in a press release. "Recently elected public officials have the opportunity to impact the future of our state by committing to these recommended policy changes and others proven to make a difference to child outcomes."

The report did show Hillsdale County as third out of 49 counties in infant mortality rate at just 3.7 deaths for every 1,000 infants compared to the state average of 7.3 deaths. Hillsdale also saw the number of children qualifying for food assistance drop substantially.

Still, Zehnder-Merrell said there is plenty of cause for concern in the report especially when considering the amount of suspected abuse and neglect in the county.

"Kids that experience abuse or neglect are damaged. Research shows that neglect is every bit as damaging to kids as physical abuse," Zehnder-Merrell said.

"It's clear from this data that a lot of families are struggling and several of the policies we are proposing will help families survive until the economy picks up.

We only get one chance at childhood and if we don't make these investments now, we'll be looking at huge costs when they become adults because they won't be prepared to take the jobs of the 21st century."

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