

Survey: Recession sent Michigan's child poverty up

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More of Michigan's children fell into poverty during the Great Recession, according to the annual Kids Count survey released Tuesday.

The report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation on the well-being of children said 1 in 4 Michigan youngsters was in an impoverished household in 2012, up from 19 percent in 2005. In addition, the number of children living in high-poverty areas rose from 8 percent in 2000 to 16 percent in 2008-12, the survey said.

The 2014 Kids Count Data Book ranks states by four main measures of child well-being: economics, education, health and family/community.

Michigan remains in the lower half of states, slipping from 31st last year to 32nd this year. The state ranks 34th in economic well-being, 38th in education and 29th in health and family/community.

"When you look at health care and education, we really haven't gotten worse, other states are improving much faster than we are," said Judy Putnam, a spokeswoman for the Michigan League for Public Policy, the state partner for Kids Count. "We are kind of running in place while they are racing ahead."

Matt Gillard, president and CEO of Michigan's Children, a nonpartisan advocacy group for children and families, said supportive rhetoric from Lansing and Washington has not produced policies to improve their prospects.

"We have a very important election coming up and it is imperative for people who may be upset or even outraged by what is coming out in Kids Count about the state of education and what we are doing or what we are not doing, to get engaged in this election and to start to hold candidates, and ultimately office holders accountable for what their priorities are," said Gillard.

Bob Wheaton, spokesman for the Michigan's Department of Human Services, said officials are pursuing initiatives to help alleviate poverty among Michigan families.

"The best way to prevent child poverty is to make sure that there are jobs for parents and make sure they have the skills to get those jobs," Wheaton said.

One such initiative started in 2012: Pathways to Potential places department caseworkers in schools to aid children and families, Wheaton said. The caseworkers observe poverty-related issues affecting children, such as a lack of transportation to school or students missing classes because they are babysitting younger siblings for parents who can't afford child care.

The initiative is in 169 schools in 13 counties, said Wheaton.

The Michigan League for Public Policy suggests restoring education funding cut since the start of the Great Recession, with a focus on making sure kids can read by the end of third grade; supporting low-income families through tax credits and more robust food and cash assistance, and increasing child care payments to help working parents.

It also recommends investing in strategies to reduce the 8.4 percent of Michigan babies with low birth weight, particularly in communities of color.

The report did find Michigan is making progress in some areas.

Fewer teens in the state are having babies because of strong public health education measures. Since the first Kids Count report in 1990, Michigan's teen birth rate has fallen 56 percent, from 59 to 26 births per 1,000.

Also, the state's stronger teen driver laws, including a graduated driver's license, are credited with a 41 percent improvement in the child and teen death rate.

Michigan also enjoyed a 41 percent drop in the number of children living in families where the head of the household lacks a diploma, and a 28 percent improvement in the share of 3- and 4-year-olds not attending preschool.

Martin Ackley, a spokesman for the state Department of Education said students have done better over the past few years on both the MEAP and Michigan Merit Exam.

"We know that much work needs to be done so every student in Michigan is proficient the core subjects, and schools continue to work hard toward that goal," said Ackley.

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