

Child abuse, neglect rise sharply in Ingham County



Will Kangas, wkangas@lsj.com

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LANSING – Ingham County saw a 38 percent rise in child poverty and 82 percent increase in victims of child abuse and neglect since 2006, according to a new report on the well being of children.

The Michigan League for Public Policy's Kids Count Data Book, which looks at the overall well being of children in the state, analyzed change in key categories from 2006 to 2012 or 2013, depending on the category.

Released today, the report shows that statewide, 23 percent of children are living in poverty, compared to 29.7 percent in Ingham County, 15 percent in Eaton County and 12 percent in Clinton County. Kids who live in homes with incomes of less than \$23,600 for a two-parent family of four fall below the poverty line.

In Ingham County, the number of children living in poverty increased from 13,172 to 16,645 between 2006 and 2012. There was a corresponding rise in the number of kids enrolled in the state supplemental assistance nutrition program (11.6 percent) and free lunch eligibility (12 percent) for the same time period.

Studies show child poverty and neglect go hand in hand, according to Jane Zehnder-Merrell, Kids Count in Michigan Project director at the Michigan League for Public Policy.

"The most jarring of all the statistics for Ingham County is the number of reports of child abuse and neglect," she said. "But unfortunately those numbers are sure to follow sobering statistics about poverty."

The number of confirmed victims of child abuse and neglect rose to 1,531 in 2012, compared with 927 in 2006, which put Ingham County in the bottom portion at 66 out of 83 counties in the state. That coincided with an increase over the same time period of family abuse and neglect investigations, which rose from 5,656 to 7,147.

Zehnder-Merrell said the big problem is child care. She said as the number of welfare recipients have risen since 2006 the amount of help with child care costs has gone down.

"And so we have children staying at home from school to watch other siblings while the parents work," she said. "Having a truant child home from school is reported as 'neglect.'"

Bob Wheaton, spokesperson for the Michigan Department of Human Services, said the merging of DHS and the department of community health in April is meant to help the problem at the state and county level.

"The idea is that the merging of these two departments will translate to help at the county level in terms of helping people with barriers," Wheaton said. "We feel we will be in a better position to help with child abuse and neglect."

"It's unfortunate and discouraging," said Matt Gillard, president of Michigan's Children, a public policy advocate for state children in Lansing. "When child poverty goes up, so does child abuse and neglect."

Matt Gillard, president of Michigan's Children, a public policy advocate for state children in Lansing, said there seems to be no commitment from legislators to focus on child poverty. He cited the Earned Income Tax Credit being cut by 70 percent in 2011.

"This issue has not been a priority from policy makers in Lansing and it is distressing," he said. "The problem is it is harder to focus on such a broad issue because we are talking about families and not just one student or one issue."

He said it was obvious to see which programs did get attention from the public because they were the ones that improved.

For example, Ingham County's infant mortality rate improved from 7.1 percent to 5.8 percent along with a lower number of teen births – 273 in 2012, down from 368 in 2012 – for a state ranking of 14.

"These statistics are considered victories," Zehnder-Merrell said. "But they also show what can happen when there is a concerted effort towards a specific problem."

Linda Vail, Ingham County Health Officer, said the key to combating child poverty is getting help to children as early as possible, before school starts.

"Our Head Start program and financial literacy programs are examples of the types of help we try to provide," she said. "But there is no silver bullet. This is a problem that can't be solved with one program."

But in neighboring counties like Clinton and Eaton, child well being statistics have not mirrored Ingham County. Eaton County's rate of 15 percent and Clinton County's 11 percent are well below the state average of 23 percent.

Statistics were also better in terms of child abuse and neglect. Clinton ranked second best in the state in terms of the number of investigations and confirmed victims. Eaton County is ranked 16th but the number of confirmed victims fell from 345 to 295.

Zehnder-Merrell said the differences between the counties comes down to demographics.

"Clinton County simply doesn't have as many minorities," she said. "Statistics show that minorities remain the most impoverished."

From 2006-12, Ingham County's number of kids who are identified as white fell by nearly 17 percent and the number of kids identified as black or "other" rose by 20 percent. In Clinton County, the number of white children increased by 0.5 percent, in Eaton it fell by 6 percent.

See the report online at www.mlpp.org.

At a glance

Child poverty rates/number of children, as of 2012

Ingham County 30 percent 16,645

Eaton County 15 percent/3,609

Clinton County 12 percent/2,144

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