Our Communities

Study: Louisiana worst state to be a child

A higher percentage of Louisiana children live in poverty than any other state.

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Staff Writer

LAFAYETTE — Some Louisiana children have never even seen a book, let alone learned how to hold a pencil, until going to school for the first time.

Others can only stare blankly when asked to talk about animals at the zoo. They've never been. An elephant or zebra means nothing to them.

Poverty is a relative thing to most people. But children in Louisiana are well acquainted with the true meaning and day-to-day living of poverty. For the eighth straight year, more of Louisiana's children live in poverty than in any other state in the country.

Poverty rises in 10 years

According to KIDS COUNT, a national study of child well-being factors done by The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 25 percent more of Louisiana's children live in poverty than 10 years ago. While the national average held at 21 percent, only two other states had a higher jump in child poverty rates: Connecticut saw a 58 percent rise over the last 10 years and Oklahoma rose by 29 percent.

The 1998 figures, released Monday, also show that Louisiana has twice the national average in its percentage of children living in extreme poverty. Eighteen percent of Louisiana's children are in families struggling on incomes below $7,313; the national average is 9 percent.

In composite rankings of 10 well-being factors, Louisiana is the worst state in which to be a child. This marks the fifth straight year the state has held the distinction. It has never risen above the 48th position.

No surprise to child advocates

"That shouldn't surprise anybody here, not really," said Judy Watts, president of Agenda for Children, a children's advocacy group based in New Orleans. "The poverty level is the basic block for all of the other problems we see. With poverty comes no health care, a high rate of single-parent families, poor child care, parishes with less money to pay for education. It becomes a self-perpetuating thing that no one seems to know how to break out of."

Single-parent homes rise

Corresponding to the dramatic increase in poverty was a 43 percent hike in the state's percent of children living in single-parent homes. Louisiana is ranked 49th in that statistic. It is also 49th in its percentage of low birth-rate babies.

In a corroborating study released Sunday by the Children's Defense Fund, one out of every four children living in the South, lives in poverty. Half of them are in extreme poverty, living on incomes below $7,313. This means a family of three would make do with income of less than $120 a week.

Patsy Williams works with homeless and impoverished youth through the Lafayette Parish School Board. While she has seen a dramatic increase in the numbers of children being brought to her attention, she said she hasn't seen the same increase in understanding by the rest of the population.

"I'll go and speak to groups about this issue and everyone always tells me, 'Oh, I was poor as a child, too,'" Williams said. "There is a dramatic difference today in being poor than when I was a child and people don't want to understand that. Being poor is one thing, being impoverished in something else."

Lower IQ test scores

Children living in poverty may enter school with an IQ testing more than 9 points lower than average. Children in poverty are two times more likely to be held back a grade and 3.4 times more likely to be expelled. They are one-third as likely to enter any type of college and one-half as likely to earn a bachelor's degree.

"We are losing these children and I find that very frightening. We need to find a way to respond," Watts said. "People think simply finding a job for these families puts an end to the poverty, but that is completely false. Oftentimes, it can make it worse."

Watts blames Louisiana's failure to back up the oil-based economy in the early 80s for the original explosion in poverty rates and while the state is enjoying a current boom in economic fortunes, she points out that much of that is based on minimum-wage employment, such as tourism and entertainment industries.

"So, it appears that we are given this situation in this state of carrying so many of our children in poverty," she said.

"That means we need to make sure we negate the effects of that poverty on our children. We absolutely owe it to our kids to at least make sure they have good health care and good child care available to them. Until we do that, we continue to fail our children. We will not be able to reverse these trends."