Report shows La. children in trouble

Advocate staff and wire reports

NEW ORLEANS — Louisiana’s 1.5 million children face alarming chances of growing up poor, going to jail or dying young, a child advocacy group’s new study says.

About 5,800 children around the state are incarcerated for offenses ranging from arson and burglary to homicide and rape, according to the report by the group, Agenda for Children. Most of these children are between 13 and 18 years old, but some are as young as 7.

In East Baton Rouge Parish, more than 29,000 children are in families poor enough to receive food stamps and 14,900 children are in families poor enough to qualify for Medicaid, the report shows.

Agenda for Children produced the report, the “Data Book on Louisiana’s Children,” in cooperation with the School of Social Work at Southern University-New Orleans. The report compiles data on the health care, poverty, education, abuse and criminality of children in each of the state’s parishes.

“The Data Book gives a parish-by-parish picture of what is actually going on with our children statewide, and it is no surprise that the picture is bleak,” said Judy Watts, president of Agenda for Children.

The report reveals a “bad state of affairs” for Louisiana’s children, said Eva Legard, president of the East Baton Rouge Parish School Board. “I certainly hope that the Legislature and the community as a whole will look at the report and try to do something,” Legard said.

In the New Orleans area, as many as 13 of every 1,000 children in the metropolitan New Orleans area die before their first birthday, and 30 percent live in poverty, the report says.

Officials who released the report Thursday said they hope lawmakers this year will deal better with issues such as poverty, education, prenatal care and day care.

Statistics from all 64 parishes were compiled to identify trouble spots and urge legislators to “move beyond rhetoric” and create programs and services to help and protect children.

In Orleans Parish, 45 percent of the children live in poverty and one out of every five babies is born to a teen-age mother.

But Watts said the report shows that extreme pockets of poverty are found in rural parishes, particularly in northeastern Louisiana.

The study also points out inequities, Watts said. Sabine Parish, for example, has 807 participants in a supplemental food program for low-income pregnant women, nursing mothers and malnourished children. But in Plaquemines Parish, similar in size with nearly the same poverty rate, only 22 mothers and children receive those benefits.

The Morning Advocate
Saturday, January 11, 1992
Page 1B1 Columns 2-5