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Kids Count fears rise in poverty

By Sean Flynn
Daily News staff

Rhode Island Kids Count released its 15th annual report on the well-being of the state's children this morning before an audience of more than 500 community leaders, policy-makers and legislators expected to gather at the Crown Plaza Hotel in Warwick.

"The recent economic crisis in our state and in our nation places children and families at risk as they struggle to pay the high costs of housing, food, heat, gas and child care," said Elizabeth Burke Bryant, executive director of Rhode Island Kids Count.

Bryant said she is concerned the number of children in the state living in poverty could increase, since there was an increase from 2006 to 2007, according to the most recent poverty data available from the U.S. Census Bureau.

There were 40,468 children in the state living in families who had incomes below the poverty level set by the federal government, according to the American Community Survey of 2007. That represented 17.5 percent of all children in the state. That is an increase from 2006, when 15.1 percent of the state's children were in poverty. The poverty

level of a family of three is \$16,705. For a family of four, it is \$21,027.

Of the children living in poverty, almost half of them were living in what is defined as "extreme poverty." In this category, the income level of a family of three is less than \$8,673. For a family of four, it is less than \$10,917.

The organization compiled tables and statistics illustrating 63 aspects of children's lives from birth through adolescence in its 168-page 2009 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook. The Factbook includes a new indicator this year, "Housing and Health." Rhode Island has the highest percentage of low-income children living in older housing in the nation, which puts them at risk for lead poisoning, childhood asthma and injuries.

"We focus on childhood poverty," Bryant said. "It is relevant to the other 62 indicators. We are very concerned that children in poverty are not having their basic needs met. They need to live and grow and attend school."

The statewide data show poverty disproportionately affects minority children. In 2007, 42 percent of Hispanic children, 29 percent of Asian children and 29 percent of black children lived in poverty, compared to 12 percent of white children.

The breakdown of children living in poverty on a community-by-community basis still is based on 2000 U.S. Census data. That information will be updated in the 2010 census.

While the number of children living in poverty fluctuates from year to year, with no steady increase or decrease, Bryant said more has to be done. "We need to ensure that critical public policy investments in child care, early education, health care and adult education and training remain in place and are strengthened," she said. "There must be a safety net in place for families that lose their jobs and families that struggle to care for their children."

"Investments in children and families are more essential now than ever before," she said.

Factbook indicators and statistics are grouped into five categories: family and community, economic well-being, health, safety, and education.

Harriet Meyer, president of the Chicago-based Ounce of Prevention, was to be the keynote speaker at this morning's policy breakfast. She planned to call on state and federal government to invest more in early childhood programs such as Head Start to prepare more children in low-income families for school.

"We as a nation are capable of setting a new direction for the next generation by increasing investments in early learning," she said in prepared remarks.

The 2009 Factbook will be available soon at www.rikidscount.org.

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BY THE NUMBERS

The following statistics are included in the 2009 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook, which was released today. The statistics are from various years; the most recent figures for each category were used in this chart.

	NEWPORT	MIDDLETOWN	PORTSMOUTH	TIVERTON	JAMESTOWN	STATE
Child population	5,199	4,328	4,329	3,367	1,238	234,821
Children living in single-parent families	44%	19%	16%	17%	15%	31%
Children living below federal poverty threshold	24.4%	6.2%	2.8%	2.8%	1.4%	17.5%
Median household income	\$40,669	\$51,075	\$58,835	\$49,997	\$63,073	\$53,568
Average cost of monthly rent	\$1,545	\$1,213	\$1,239	\$1,136	\$1,512	\$1,232