



**For Immediate Release**

**Contact:**

Raymonde Charles  
Day: (401) 351-9400, Ext. 22  
rcharles@rikidscount.org

**Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Presents:  
*Pawtucket Data in Your Backyard***

**Rhode Island KIDS COUNT**

One Union Station  
Providence, RI 02903  
401/351-9400  
401/351/1758

*While the state and country are experiencing tough economic times, fewer Pawtucket families are receiving cash assistance through the Rhode Island Works Program. Since 2004, the percentage of children in families enrolled in cash assistance has decreased by half (from 16% to 8%).*

*Despite high child poverty rates, Pawtucket shows gains in educational achievement.*

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**Pawtucket, RI, June 25, 2009** - Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Policy Analyst, Stephanie Geller, presented data from the *2009 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook* to an audience of community leaders, parents and policy makers. The presentation included highlights of improvements and declines in the well-being of children and youth in Pawtucket. After the presentation, community members discussed opportunities to improve outcomes for children in Pawtucket. The presentation was hosted by the Pawtucket School Department Child Opportunity Zone and was held on **Thursday, June 25, 2009 from 9:00 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. at St. Paul's Episcopal Church**, 50 Park Place, Pawtucket, RI.

Pawtucket continues to have one of the highest child poverty rates in the state, with almost one out of three children (30%) living in families with incomes below the poverty line. In 2008, the federal poverty threshold was \$17,346 for a family of three. Many poor families live in extreme poverty – with incomes below half the poverty line. “Over the past five years, there has been a substantial decline in the number of families receiving cash assistance, the safety net for our state’s poorest families,” stated Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT.

“The high rate of unemployment in Rhode Island, along with stricter eligibility criteria and shorter time limits for cash assistance, may leave families without employment or a cash assistance safety net, resulting in a rise in deep poverty, hardship and homelessness,” said Bryant.

Almost seven out of ten people who benefit from Rhode Island Works cash assistance are children under the age of 18, and nearly half (49%) of these children are under the age of six. In 2008, there were 1,413 Pawtucket children in families receiving cash assistance through the Rhode Island Works Program. The percentage of Pawtucket children in families enrolled in Rhode Island Works has decreased by half since 2004 (from 16% to 8%). This decline mirrors the statewide decline in the caseload – which decreased by half (54%) between 1996 and 2008 (from 18,428 cases in 1996 to 8,424 cases in 2008). In just the past year, the caseload statewide decreased by 16%.

### **Education Outcomes Improve**

Pawtucket saw improvements in educational outcomes in many areas. In the 2008-2009 school year, 84% of kindergarten children in Pawtucket were enrolled in full-day programs, a significant improvement from the 2007-2008 school year when only 26% of kindergartners were enrolled in full-day programs. However, there are still approximately 120 kindergarten children in Pawtucket who do not have access to full-day programs. “Research shows that children in full-day kindergarten benefit academically and are more likely to be ready for first grade than children in half-day kindergarten programs,” stated Stephanie Geller, Policy Analyst at Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. “Full-day kindergarten programs can be especially beneficial to poor and minority children and can contribute significantly to closing academic achievement gaps.”

Pawtucket is making progress in improving academic achievement. “While these trends are going in the right direction, they continue to lag behind the state as a whole,” stated Geller.

Highlights during the 2008-2009 school year in Pawtucket include:

- The rate of fourth graders reading at or above proficiency level increased from 48% in 2005 to 58% in 2008, but continued to be lower than the rate for the state as a whole (68%).
- The rate of fourth graders scoring at or above proficiency in math increased from 42% in 2005 to 50% in 2008, compared to the state rate of 63%.
- The rate of eighth graders scoring at or above proficiency in reading increased from 44% in 2005 to 52% in 2008, lower than the state rate of 65%.

- Pawtucket's four-year high school graduation rate has improved from 48% in 2007 to 57% in 2008, yet is still well below the state average of 74%.

Nearly 1 in 4 students in Pawtucket schools changed school settings at least once during the 2007-2008 school year. Children who change schools mid-year are absent more often, perform worse on standardized tests, and are less likely to graduate high school than their peers who do not change schools. Just over 10% (871) of Pawtucket's 8,530 students were receiving English language learner (ELL) services in the 2008-2009 school year, the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest percentage in the state.

### **Economic Well-Being**

Between 2005 and 2007, of the 17,218 children living in Pawtucket, 30% (5,168) lived in poverty, considerably higher than the state rate of 17.5%. Access to food programs for children in low-income families is often critical to healthy child development. In 2007, almost one in four children (23%) who were income-eligible for Food Stamps lived in a family that was not enrolled in the program. The Food Stamp Program is now called SNAP – the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Pawtucket is one of five school districts in Rhode Island that offers universal School Breakfast in all of its schools. One in four low-income children in Pawtucket participates in the School Breakfast Program. "Pawtucket has shown leadership by offering universal School Breakfast in all schools throughout the district. Strategies to increase program participation include providing additional information to families about the benefits to school performance and offering breakfast in the classroom at the beginning of the school day."

High-quality early education is critical for moving children out of poverty and providing the foundation for success in school. Children in low-income communities benefit from access to high-quality Head Start and early education programs that build important cognitive and social skills. In 2008, there were 200 Pawtucket children enrolled in Head Start, 56 more children than were enrolled in the previous year, but still only about one-quarter of those eligible. However, fewer families had access to quality child care due to changes in the child care subsidy system. Between 2004 and 2008, the number of Pawtucket children receiving child care subsidies declined by 47%, from 1,350 in 2004 to 720 in 2008. "Low-income children living in our state's core cities are particularly vulnerable to the economic downturn. Children need access to child care, Head Start and other high quality education programs to close the gap in school achievement that often exists between higher-income and lower-income children. Investments

in adult education and training are essential to move Providence families into well-paying jobs,” remarked Geller.

## **Health**

Between 2005 and 2007, 93% of Rhode Island children under age 18 had health insurance. Investments in RIte Care, Rhode Island’s Medicaid managed care health insurance program, have helped to keep the rate of uninsured children low, despite declines in employer-sponsored health insurance coverage. Data from the *2009 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook* reveal that Pawtucket has made progress in several areas of child health over the past decade, but there is still more work to be done to ensure that Pawtucket’s children grow up healthy.

- The infant mortality rate in Pawtucket has decreased from 8.7 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1997-2001 to 7.3 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2003-2007. Despite this decrease, Pawtucket’s infant mortality rate is still substantially higher than the state infant mortality rate of 6.3 deaths per 1,000 live births.
- Between 2003 and 2007, 14.7% of births in Pawtucket were to women receiving delayed prenatal care. The percentage of women with delayed prenatal care in Pawtucket was the 4<sup>th</sup> highest in the state.
- Between 1997-2001 and 2003-2007, the percentage of infants born with low birthweight in Pawtucket increased from 7.8% to 8.8%, similar to the state trend during this period.
- Pawtucket has the third highest rate of births to teen girls ages 15-19. Between 2003 and 2007, Pawtucket had a teen birth rate of 56.4 births per 1,000 girls ages 15-19, significantly higher than the statewide rate of 30.4 births per 1,000 teen girls.

## **Safety**

Preventing child abuse and neglect is critical to helping children grow into strong, healthy productive adults and good parents. In 2008, there were 303 Pawtucket children who were victims of child abuse and neglect, a rate of 16.7 victims per 1,000 children ages birth to 18. The child abuse and neglect rate for Pawtucket was substantially higher than the state rate of 10.7 victims per 1,000 children. “Responding to reports of child abuse and neglect and ensuring child safety are important functions of child protection systems,” stated Geller. “Building the capacity to focus on prevention is more cost-effective and equally critical.”

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Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is a statewide children’s policy organization that works to improve the economic well-being, health, safety, education and development of Rhode Island children.