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Poverty on the rise among city children

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WOONSOCKET -- Children in Woonsocket can smile about improvements in their school system, but for many, those must still overcome a growing burden of poverty.

That message was driven home during a presentation of R.I. Kids Count statistics on local children to members of local social organizations at the Chaplin-Perez Center at 37 Center St. Wednesday.

The overview by Kids Count policy analyst Kathleen Keenan offered information on local children in five categories: economic well-being, health, safety, education and census-based indicators.

"I think that in some areas, Woonsocket is doing really well, especially in the education indicators," Keenan said.

The statistics on children's health care showing a high percentage of coverage was also encouraging, she said.

But the number of children in poverty in Woonsocket remains a cause for concern, according to Keenan. "The child poverty rate remains very high and it impacts everything from education to safety," she said.

A total of 11,155 children under the age of 18 were reported to live in Woonsocket in 2000 U.S. Census figures, according to the report. Of that number 65 percent were white, 18.1 percent Hispanic or Latino, 5.4 percent black or African-American, 5.3 percent Asian, and 3 percent in other ethnic backgrounds such as American Indian or Native Hawaiian.

Children of color still remain more likely to live in poverty in Woonsocket, according to the figures. The census figures show 61 percent of poor children in the city to be children of color, Keenan said, compared to the statewide percentage of 64 percent.

The number of children in poverty has also grown, according to the findings. In 1990, a total of 2,235 children under the age of 18, or 19.2 percent of the city's population of children, were reported living below federal poverty guides in 1990, and in 2000 that figure rose to 3,494 children, or 31.8 percent. Statewide, 30,022 children statewide were reported in poverty in 1990 and 41,162, below the federal poverty guide in 2000.

A single-parent family would need to earn three times the current federal poverty level guide of \$15,670 to meet the basic costs in today's economy, Ellen Frank, a senior economist at Rhode Island College, told the group.

The rising cost of housing is also making it harder for families on those incomes to put a house over their heads, Frank noted.

In the past five years, the cost of an average rent in the state has more than doubled from \$500 to \$1,100 and \$1,200, she said.

"That has pushed the cost of living way up in the state," Frank said.

Rhode Island residents have also seen incomes decline through a shift from better-paying manufacturing jobs to lower-paying service and unskilled employment opportunities over the past 10 years, she noted.

And while families have also been hit by a decline in private sector-provided medical coverage, Frank said the state has done a good job of stepping in with programs such as RiteCare to fill that gap.

"Rhode Island ranks second in the nation for children having health care," she said. The state ranks second only to Vermont in that regard, and Frank credited the state and Gov. Donald Carcieri for supporting the programs that make that distinction possible.

The state's tracking of education improvements at local schools were encouraging, according to Keenan. Three of Woonsocket's

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schools are now classified as high performing and five as moderately performing, according to the findings. Four other schools classified as in need of improvement, with one of that number making sufficient progress.

The city also has adopted an all-day kindergarten program to help its youngest students do better in school and was one of 11 in the state to do so in the 2004-2005 school year.

The information collected by Kids Count and available on the agency's Web site, www.rikids.com, also tracks factors like the use of alcohol and drugs by Woonsocket middle school and Woonsocket high school students, the incidence of teen pregnancy in the city and the long-standing problem of child neglect and abuse.

In statistics from the state's SALT survey reports, 22 percent of students at the middle school and 39 percent of students at the high school reported using alcohol in the past thirty days, Keenan said.

The same survey found 11 percent of local middle school students and 26 percent of high school students to have reported using alcohol during the past 30 days.

The study also found that students in urban communities actually reported lower rates of alcohol, drug and cigarette use than their counterparts in suburban communities, she said.

The rates of births to girls age 15 to 17 dropped in Woonsocket from 60.6 per 1,000 to 46.0 per 1,000 over the past 10 years, but are still double the state's rate, the study found.

The study also found that there were 97 births to girls age 12 to 14 in Woonsocket between 1999 and 2003, and 3,942 births to girls age 18 to 19.

The rate of homelessness for families with children was also reported to remain on the rise. Of the 6,020 people to have received homeless services in Rhode Island in 2004, 418 people claimed Woonsocket as their city of last residence, she said, an increase of 89 percent since 2001.

And while figures for child abuse and neglect in Woonsocket have declined since 1994, at 13.1 cases per 1,000 children it also remains one of the highest rates in the state, Keenan said.

That one area appears to have been most affected by the collaboration of local groups such as Connecting for Children and Families, Thundermist Healthcare, Landmark Medical Center, Family Resources Community Action, the Woonsocket school department and the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families, in a task force seeking to bring greater awareness of the problem, she said.

Terese Curtin, executive director of Connecting for Children and Families, said she also sees the collaborative work as helping.

"The work of all the organizations on that task force to come up with new strategies of addressing the problem has been very helpful," she said.

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