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Child poverty rates declining locally

By Stephanie Turaj
Staff Writer

Approximately one in five children in Rhode Island is living below the federal poverty line – \$18,000 a year to support a family of three – according to a recent study released by Rhode Island Kids Count.

Poverty rates for the state's children rose from 15.5 percent in 2008 to 21.5 percent in 2013, while the U.S. rates increased from 18.2 percent to 22.2 percent during that same time period. The Rhode Island Kids Count study also analyzed poverty rates for Rhode Island municipalities. It found that poverty rates among children in Narragansett and South Kingstown have dropped since 2000.

The study found that 127, or 5.6 percent, of Narragansett children lived in poverty from 2009 to 2013, compared to 235, or 8.6 percent, in 2000. In South Kingstown, 247, or 4.9 percent of children, lived in poverty from 2009 to 2013, compared to 324, or 5.3 percent, in 2000.

"The numbers have dropped dramatically since the height of the recession," said Lisa Wright, development officer of the Jonnycake Center of Peace Dale. "The number of people

unemployed has fallen, but unemployment rates don't tell the whole picture. I think the lower gas prices have helped people. There's a lot of other things that play into how people are doing."

The Jonnycake Center, 1231 Kingstown Road, Peace Dale, offers a community food pantry and thrift store and also tracks local poverty statistics. Wright said the center distributed slightly more meals last year than in 2013.

"It's important to note that these numbers are an economic indicator. Obviously it's very linked to the economic picture and the jobs picture in Rhode Island," said Elizabeth Burke Bryant, director of Rhode Island Kids Count. "The percentage of poor children has to do with the amount of income in the household, and so it was not a surprise to see that child poverty in Rhode Island increased during the years of the recession."

While 53 percent of all poor children in Rhode Island are white, children of color and children of immigrants are more likely to grow up poor, according to the study. Single parenthood, low educational attainment, part-time or no employment and low wages of parents place children at risk of

being poor.

"There are other ways that school districts measure a percentage of children who are eligible for free and reduced price lunch," Burke Bryant said. "There are short-term things that can be done to reduce the effects of poverty on children, whether that be making sure they are connected to nutrition programs, providing health care assistance and health care insurance while families are making the journey into jobs that can lift the families out of poverty. There's also long-term and short-term educational strategies."

Wright said the Jonnycake Center has a meal program that will offer breakfast and lunch to nearly 200 children during this week's school vacation.

According to the Rhode Island Kids Count study, addressing child poverty in Rhode Island requires a multifaceted approach, including strategies that attract high-wage jobs, improving the education levels of our current and future workforce and providing access to job training, literacy programs and English language acquisition.

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