

More children living in poverty in Kentucky, Indiana, annual survey shows

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The number of children living in poverty has increased in Kentucky and Indiana, following a national trend of high unemployment and growing poverty in families, according to the latest "Kid Count," an annual state-by-state survey of child well-being by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

The numbers are alarming because of the adverse effect poverty has on children's health and achievement, said Terry Brooks, executive director of Kentucky Youth Advocates, which contributed to the annual report.

"I think folks realize that poverty has not only an immediate effect on kids but a long-term effect," Brooks said.



Latisha Rhodes, center, with her husband Byron Rhodes, right, spent some time on the playground with six of their nine children. Seated on the steps are twins Giovanni (left) and Gianiyah, and above them, from left, are Sandra, Brendan, Anaya and Byron Rhodes. (By Deborah Yetter, The Courier-Journal) July 26, 2010.

And the true picture of child poverty is likely worse, since Kids Count relies on data from 2007 and 2008 — before the recession took hold in late 2008, according to the report being released Tuesday by the Casey Foundation, a national advocacy and research group based in Baltimore.

“Unfortunately, it very likely will get worse before it gets better,” said Bill Stanczykiewicz, president of the Indiana Youth Institute. “Poverty is one of the last economic indicators to improve.”

In Kentucky, the study found about 23 percent of the state’s children live at or below the federal poverty level — \$21,834 per year for a family of two parents and two children. That’s up five percent from the year 2000, the Kids Count report said.

Where Kentucky, Indiana stand

Overall rankings for the past five years in the annual Kids Count by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, which measures child health and welfare for each state.

	State ranking				
Kentucky	42nd	40th	41st	41st	40th
Indiana	32nd	31st	34th	31st	33rd
	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010

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In Indiana, 18 percent of children live in poverty — a 4 percent increase from 2000.

The report also found that an increasing number of children in both states live in single parent homes, which puts them at an economic disadvantage.

“The fastest way for a child to be poor is to live in a single parent home,” Stanczykiewicz said. Overall, Kentucky ranked 40th among states in child well-being, compared to 41 last year.

Indiana dropped to 33 from 31 one year ago, the report said.

At the Volunteers of America family shelter in Louisville, parents Byron and Latisha Rhodes know too well the hardships of poverty and unemployment — both lost their jobs in Chicago in 2007-08, and they soon found themselves struggling to take care of nine children, ages 19 through 2.

“It’s hard, looking at your child” said Latisha Rhodes, who lost her job as a medical billing technician in 2007. “They’ll ask for a dollar and you don’t have a dollar.”

A year later, her husband lost his job as a mechanic after he was injured in an accident and couldn’t return to work immediately. Then, they lost all their belongings in a house fire and became homeless.

They recently came to Louisville with their children to be closer to Byron Rhodes’ elderly father, hoping they will have better luck finding work. The couple said they still are in disbelief over how quickly they went from a comfortable existence to poverty.

“In a one-year span, it all fell apart,” Byron Rhodes said.

Jane Burks, president of Volunteers of America of Kentucky, said an increasing number of people seeking help from the agency are parents with children. Even if one parent works, it’s often not enough to keep the family out of poverty and in a home, she said.

“The face of homelessness in our shelter is increasingly the face of a child,” she said.

Both Indiana and Kentucky fared poorly in the number of children in homes where parents have secure employment, one of the measures Kids Count uses to rank child well-being. In Indiana, 28 percent of children lived in homes where no parent had full-time employment; in Kentucky, the rate was 33 percent.

Brooks said stable jobs with benefits, such as health insurance, are key to child well-being and said state officials need to do more to improve skills among adults and create job opportunities. One problem is the state's relatively low level of educational attainment — about 10 percent of Kentucky teens ages 16 to 19, or about 24,000 youths were not in school or working and about 16,000 teens had not completed high school or were not pursuing a diploma, the report found.

"A lot of folks are doing a lot of talking about graduation," Brooks said. "Our graduation rates are improving, but we are continuing to lose ground to other states."

Stanczykiewicz said Indiana has experienced a steady erosion of manufacturing jobs that tend to be held by workers with high school degrees at most.

"The bottom line is education — education is the greatest equalizer in terms of getting people out of poverty," he said.

Another disturbing finding is that the percentage of underweight babies — weighing 5.5 pounds or less at birth — has increased in both states, a condition that puts children at risk of poorer health at birth and delays in development. In Kentucky, 9.3 percent of infants were considered underweight at birth and in Indiana, 8.2 percent.

Officials in both states blame high rates of smoking — a risk factor for low birth weights. Kentucky ranks second in the nation in the percentage of adults who smoke and Indiana, third, according to the latest estimates from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevent. West Virginia ranks first.

Brooks noted that the Kentucky legislature this year agreed to fund smoking cessation services for Medicaid patients — he hopes that leads to a decrease in smoking among pregnant women. Brooks said he hopes the dismal findings of Kids Count will spur lawmakers and state officials to try to find creative solutions to help families — instead of simply citing the state budget shortfall.

"What I would hope is that legislators don't cop out by saying it's the budget, we can't do anything," he said.

At the Volunteers of America shelter, the Rhodeses said they are focused on keeping the family together, getting the children enrolled in good schools and finding jobs and their own home. "It does impact them," Latisha Rhodes said of her children. "They ask all the time, when are we going to get a house?"

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