

Report: Texas ranks in bottom 10 states for percentage of children in poverty

State dropped to 39th in overall child well-being.

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Texas has a higher percentage of children living in poverty than 41 other states, according to a new study on the well-being of the nation's children.

Twenty-three percent of the state's children live in poverty, compared with the national average of 18 percent, says this year's edition of the annual Kids Count study, expected to be released today by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a private funding and research organization dedicated to vulnerable children. That statewide figure is from 2004, the most recent data available. It's up from 22 percent in 2000.

Overall, the Lone Star State ranks in the bottom quarter of states in the study, which measures the poverty, health and education of children. Texas placed 39th, down from 37th last year.

Although better than the national average on education, Texas, which spends about \$24 billion a year on health and human services programs, fared worse than other states on poverty and children's health. The state made major cuts in social services funding in 2003 that have not been fully restored.

"With the consistent cuts in state-level funding to health and human services programs, we're not going to get any better," said Frances Deviney, Texas Kids Count director. "We like to think of Texas as the best state in the country, but if we don't take care of our kids, I don't see how we can uphold this fantasy."

But Mary Katherine Stout, director of the Center for Health Care Policy Studies at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, cautioned lawmakers against using year-to-year changes rather than long-term data to craft public policy. She suggested that some of the KIDS COUNT findings — such as the percentage of Texas children living in poverty increasing 1 percentage point — could be explained as rounding errors.

"There has been no meaningful change," said Stout, whose group supports limited government. "These kind of publications always report bad news as a way of advocating increased spending at both the state and national levels. All reasonable measures show that people are better off today and enjoy a more reasonable standard of living."

Using the most recent data available, the study found:

- Texas has the highest percentage of uninsured children in the country, 21 percent. The national average is 11 percent.
- Almost half of Texas children lived in low-income families in 2004. That's an income below \$38,314 for a family of four.
- Texas' infant mortality rate and the percentage of babies with low birth weights increased between 2000 and 2003. The state ranks 22nd in the nation on both.

The findings didn't surprise Cary Duval, director of outreach for El Buen Samaritano Episcopal Mission, which serves 40,000 Central Texans per year — mostly working-poor Hispanic families — through education programs, a food pantry and a health clinic.

"The root cause for all of this is the immigration issue," Duval said. "Unless the laws change to allow immigrant families to be legal in this country and have an opportunity to have a legal job . . . things are not going to change for them, and opportunities are not going to be available."

Twenty-nine percent of Texas children are in immigrant families, compared with 20 percent of children in the country, according to Kids Count.

For East Austin resident María Hernández, making ends meet has been a challenge since the father of her three boys died in December. Midday Monday, she walked from home with her children, ages 16, 14 and 5, to nearby Zavala Elementary, where the boys ate chili hot dogs, carrots and pear halves as part of the Austin school district's free summer food program.

"As a woman, you earn very little," said Hernández, 36, who recently took a job at a state office after several years of not working. "It's very difficult starting out."

The good news

- Texas fourth-graders rank sixth in the country for the percentage who scored at or above the basic math level: 87 percent. Fourth-graders also performed better than peers in other states in reading.
- Texas eighth-graders did better than the national average on math.

Other study facts

- One in 10 Texas children lives in extreme poverty (below \$9,579 a year for a family of four in 2004).
- Texas had the second-lowest percentage of immunized children in 2004, 75 percent. Only Nevada had a lower percentage, 71 percent.