

Area leads state in child poverty

Also teenage crime and suicide

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Conditions for children living in Jackson County improved slightly overall in 1998, but proportionately more kids in Southern Oregon were affected by poverty, divorce and lack of health insurance than those elsewhere in the state.

At the same time, the region continued to outstrip state rates for juvenile crime and for suicide attempts by teenagers.

Those are among the conclusions drawn by Children First for Oregon, a statewide advocacy group that compiles an annual snapshot of kids' well-being.

Released today in Portland, the report confirmed what many child-

ren's advocates already know.

"I wished I saw different numbers," said Carin Niebuhr of the Jackson County Commission on Children and Families. "It is just a picture of the problems of children and families and all the indicators are negative indicators. I hope we can make changes in some of those numbers. We have seen some changes, but we have a ways to go."

More than a quarter of children — 26 percent — live in poverty in a four-county region that includes Jackson County, the report revealed. That compares to a state rate of 16 percent.

Some 2.4 percent of Jackson County children saw their parents divorce in 1998, compared to the state average of 1.7 percent. The

county recorded 561 divorces in 1998, which means at least 1,045 children were affected.

The report concluded that the percentage of children in Jackson County who lack health insurance — 16 percent — is twice as high as the state average of 8 percent.

The juvenile arrest rate in Jackson County continues to be significantly worse than the state rate, although it has improved. Nearly 4,000 juveniles were arrested in the county in 1998, contributing to a rate of 88 arrests per 1,000 youths. That's nearly 10 percent better than the previous year, but it's still far worse than the state rate of

about 54 arrests per 1,000 youths.

Fifty-five children age 17 or younger attempted suicide in Jackson County in 1998. That's about a third worse than the rate of suicide attempts for the rest of the state.

The percentage of children in Jackson County who lack health insurance is twice as high as the state average.

The rate of abuse and neglect in Jackson County was 21 per 1,000 children in 1998, higher than the state's 18 per 1,000, but still 2 percent better than the previous year.

That's not necessarily bad news, said Susan Kaough, branch manager for the Jackson County office of state Services to Children and Families. "We have a very high rate of reporting," Kaough said. "We consistently receive and investigate

more reports than counties of larger size. With more reporting, you have more founded cases of abuse and neglect."

Some children's advocates saw a bright side to the report. Alan Berlin, director of Head Start for Southern Oregon, pointed to marked increases in the number of young children being prepared for school. His pre-kindergarten program now serves 44 percent of eligible children — a 52 percent jump from the previous year. Nearly 60 percent of kindergartners in Jackson County were deemed ready to learn in all areas of development. "You can see the glass as half full or half empty," Berlin said. "You can look at Swiss cheese and all you can see are the holes. But if all you ever see are the holes, that's discouraging. What I'm seeing is encouraging. At the same time, we have a ways to go."