

EDITORIALS

Report on children: We need to do more

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A new report by Children First for Oregon is a mix of bad news and good about the status of children in our state.

Sadly, as the report notes, Oregon still has excessive rates of hunger, childhood poverty, school dropouts and child abuse. Further, the report says too many families still find it difficult to provide basic necessities to their children despite a period of recent economic growth for the state.

Looking at the report, it's hard to disagree with the conclusion that Oregon's image as a "great place to raise kids" may not always match the reality.

According to the report:

- 42 percent of children live in families at or below the poverty level.
- Nearly one-third of families do not have affordable housing.
- 34 percent of public school students need food support through free and reduced-price meal programs.
- One third of children say they have close contact with an adult who engages in substance abuse or criminal activities.
- 7 percent of kids say their families set unclear rules and do not adequately monitor their behavior.
- One out of eight eighth-graders in Oregon reports living in a family where there are frequent arguments and lots of yelling and insults.

It's sad stuff, made worse, it seems, by parents contributing to the problems with some of their own poor behavior.

Closer to home, Benton County has had some success in reducing

teen pregnancy, low birth weight for babies, suicide attempts, dropout rates and child abuse and neglect. The county was better in these areas than the state average.

Linn County also showed improvements in reducing rates of juvenile arrests, teen pregnancy, dropouts and low birth-weight babies. However, it saw some slight backsliding in child abuse and crime in general. It was better than the state average in some categories (fewer suicide attempts, less child abuse and neglect, and fewer low birth-weight babies), while higher in others (juvenile arrests and teen pregnancy).

Among the suggestions to address these needs are tax relief for lower-income families, increased access to health care, and better child care options and nutrition programs. The report also indicates that employers can play a role through more flexible leave policies, closer ties to public help agencies and better referral services.

Discouraging as it may seem, the report provides some good information and a barometer on the status of children, giving policymakers and others targets for improvements.

On an optimistic note, the report shows Linn and Benton counties making some progress. Local efforts that are paying off need to be continued.

The report also clearly shows that solutions don't necessarily lie with government. Families and individuals greatly influence the future of our children and must follow through on their responsibilities. (rp)

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