

# La Grand Observer

December 17, 2001

## Region sees higher child poverty rates, report shows

By The Observer

More than half of Union County's children live in or near poverty, according to statistics released last week by Children First for Oregon.

The new statistics show that 53 percent of children in Eastern Oregon live either in or near poverty, higher than the statewide 42 percent. The federal poverty level for a family of four is

\$17,650, and those families whose incomes are between 100 percent and 200 percent of poverty are considered near poverty.

In its annual examination, this year titled "Growing Up in Oregon," Children First reported that only 47 percent of Eastern Oregon children live in families whose incomes are higher than 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

Eastern Oregon's child poverty rate is at 25 percent, 10 percent higher than the state average and another 28 percent live near poverty.

The median family income for Eastern Oregon is \$31,750, less than 200 percent of poverty, and the high cost of housing continues to take a large chunk of that income. Children First statistics show that 23 percent of Eastern

Oregon families spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing. In Union County, the average rent for a two-bedroom apartment is \$496 monthly, and 34 percent of the homes are occupied by renters.

There are some bright spots in the Union County picture. Fewer teen-agers were getting pregnant during the survey period of 2000-01, but 35 percent of the Union

County babies born in 2000 were born to unmarried women, and 15 percent of new moms were younger than 20.

The number of juvenile arrests went down, with 232 children under 18 arrested during the year, a rate of 38.4 per 1,000, better than the previous year and 13 percent better than the state average.

See CHILDREN FIRST, Page 21

### Children First: Abuse, neglect high

Continued from Page 1A

But children continue to be victims of criminal abuse and neglect, according to the statistics, with 124 children identified as victims, or 20.6 per 1,000 population, far worse than the state average of 12.2 per 1,000.

More students dropped out of Union County high schools during 2000-01 than the previous year, and eighth-grade reading and math proficiency scores went down, according to Children First, although math scores are better than the state average.

With more families requiring two incomes just to meet basic family needs, child care continues to be important in the formative years. Children First reports that Union County parents have fewer child care providers than last year, and the number is 29 percent lower

than the state average.

Although Children First did not report on the quality and availability of health care, the organization recommends that the state open the Children's Health Insurance Program to more children by increasing the amount a family can earn and still qualify for the subsidized health program.

Among the Children First recommendations:

- Better child care options for working parents, especially for the one in four who works hours other than the traditional 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.
- Help low-income families save through restricted savings accounts that can be matched through public or private organizations.
- Expand summer nutrition programs for those who qualify for free or reduced-cost school lunches.