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County's kids face a tough road

Children First report for 2003 reveals higher poverty rate, greater reliance on government assistance

By JONEL ALECCIA
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More Jackson County children live in single-parent or poor families and more receive government food and health assistance than in Oregon overall.

That's the view from a snapshot of the county's children included in an annual report released today by Children First for Oregon, a statewide advocacy group.

Nearly one in three — 31 percent — of Jackson County's more than 45,500 kids lived with a single parent in 2002, according to the Status of Oregon's Children 2003 report. Overall in Oregon, the figure was 29 percent. Some 43 percent of Jackson

County children lived in families at or near federal poverty levels and nearly one in four local kids received government support in the form of food stamps and/or Oregon Health Plan Insurance. In Oregon overall, 37 percent of children lived in or near poverty, while one in five received government food or health support.

Local child welfare indicators are worse than in Oregon as a whole, compounding a dire situation, the report's authors noted.

"With more than one in three Oregon children living in or near poverty, we know there's work to be done. A financially stable household is a foundation for a safe, secure childhood," Marie

Hoeven, Children First's executive director, said in a statement. In 2003 the federal poverty level is \$18,400 for a family of four. Financially vulnerable children are those whose families earn less than twice the poverty level, or \$36,800 for a family of four.

Marie Hoeven,
Children First's executive director

The Children First report, which focused this year on family financial stability, called on all sectors of society to invest in programs that expand affordable day care, children's health insurance and safety-net clinics and strengthen earned-income tax credits.

Jackson County fared worse than the rest of the state in other indicators as well, the report showed.

Nearly 60 percent of babies born in 2002 were delivered to mothers with a high school education or less. In Oregon overall, the figure is just over 50 percent.

Juvenile arrests in Jackson County totaled nearly 75 per 1,000 youths under age 18, a figure nearly twice the state rate of 38 youth arrests per 1,000. Jackson County's high school dropout rate is nearly 7 percent,

compared to nearly 5 percent in Oregon as a whole.

The teen-pregnancy rate in Jackson County continues to improve. In 2003, there were more than 28 pregnancies per 1,000 girls ages 15 to 17, a drop from the previous year's rate of nearly 33 per 1,000 girls. However, in Oregon overall, the rate is just over 27 pregnancies per 1,000 girls ages 15 to 17.

Bright spots in the report showed that Jackson County's unemployment rate of 7.1 percent in 2002 remained virtually stable — and lower than the state rate of 7.5 percent.

For more information, visit the Web site www.childrenfirst-foreregon.org

Reach reporter Jonel Aleccia at 776-4465, or e-mail jaleccia@mailtribune.com