

County's children don't fare well

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Coos County does worse than the state averages in many measures of child well being.

At least that's the finding of the group, Children First for Oregon, who released its findings several months ago, county by county, in the 2003 County Data Book.

According to Children First for Oregon, the worsening trend of Oregon's children living in financially unstable environments can be reversed through implementing proven policies and programs that help low-income working families break the cycle of poverty.

"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.

Coos County stats

The report shows that in Coos County, a third of the children live with a single parent.

More than half of babies are born to mothers with a high school education or less, and only 12 percent of new mothers have completed a college education. More than one in 10 students in the county has changed school districts in the last school year, leading to a higher than average mobility rate for students in Coos County.

Income and assets

The report found that 50 percent of children live in financially vulnerable families, which are described as homes with income less than twice the federal poverty level (\$36,800 for a family of four). This is much higher than the statewide rate of 37 percent.

In 1999, while almost all children had working parents, only 57 percent of children had one parent working full-time, all year.

Unemployment was higher than the statewide rate in 2002, with 8.6 percent of workers unemployed. Unemployment, the report found, has decreased slightly since 1999.

Family supports

It also found that more than one in four children in Coos County receives support in the form of food stamps and/or Oregon Health Plan insurance.

Half of school children are eligible to receive free or reduced-priced lunches during the school year, compared to 40 percent statewide.

Only 21 percent of children who receive subsidized lunches during the school year receive free lunches during the summer months despite the ongoing need.

Other indicators

Fewer third- and eighth-grade students meet or surpass the state standards in reading and math than the state average, the report found.

One in five children (20 percent) live in extreme poverty compared to only 14 percent statewide.

The high school dropout rate increased slightly in the last year, but remains better than the state rate.

Suggestions made

The 2003 Data Book makes recommendations for improving the conditions that led to the report's findings.

They include:

- Make quality child care more affordable by fully utilizing existing parent and employer child care tax credits, strengthening the state's Employment Related Day Care Program, and encouraging private-sector investment in the state's child-care system.

- Expand access to quality health care by investing in health insurance for all children, reducing barriers to participation in the Oregon Health Plan and the Family Health Insurance Assistance Program, and strengthen the system of safety-net clinics across the state, especially school-based health centers.

- Strengthen earned income tax credits by making the state Earned Income Credit refundable and increasing it, expanding public education efforts about the credits and access to tax filing assistance, and connecting families who receive the credit refunds to financial services and asset-building opportunities.

The report points out that 65 percent of Oregon families with incomes below the state median cannot find affordable child care and thus, spend more than 10 percent of their income on child care.

It adds that more than 80,000 children have no health insurance despite public health insurance programs that are supposed to cover children in low-income families.

Hunger occurs year round in Oregon, but the number of children eating lunch through federally funded meal programs falls dramatically during the summer months and varies greatly by county.

The report pointed out that an estimated \$30 million in federal Earned Income Tax Credit dollars went unclaimed by Oregon low-income families last year. Less than two percent of EITC returns were prepared at free tax preparation sites for the 2001 tax year.