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Report on kids paints a grim picture

Almost 20% of Jackson County children live in extreme poverty

By SARAH LEMON
Mail Tribune

Extreme poverty and its accompanying ills are a way of life for a far higher percentage of children in Jackson County than in the state at large.

Nearly 20 percent of the county's children live in extreme poverty, according to a report released today by Children

First for Oregon. The number is 25 percent worse than the comparable statewide average and 10 percent worse than the county's rate for the previous year, the advocacy group reported.

Forty-one percent of the county's public school children qualify for free and reduced price lunches during the acade-

mic year because of their families' low incomes. At \$52,100, the county's median income is 11 percent lower than the state median, according to Children

First, an advocacy group often most visible for its efforts in lobbying for more state funding for children and families.

Equally troubling for Medford school officials is that the

steadily increasing poverty rate has been accompanied by declining enrollment over the past several years, said Julie York, Medford schools' special services supervisor. Federal funding now benefits the district's low-income children, but declining enrollment will mean reduced funds in coming years, York said.

Children who live in poverty are also more at risk for abuse

and neglect, dropping out of high school and running afoul of the law.

"People's ability to cope is just challenged," said Doug Mares, Oregon Department of Human Services manager for Jackson and Josephine counties.

Countywide, 737 children in 2004 were victims of abuse and neglect or lived in at-risk homes, Children First reported. The

county's rate of abused and neglected children is 21 percent worse than the statewide average.

The county's children are 44 percent more likely than their counterparts statewide to live in "threat of harm." The category is reserved for kids at "extreme risk" including those living with untreated sex offenders, and domestic violence.

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