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County's children are faring well

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Study finds a few issues that raise concerns

"Madison County has a lot to be proud of" in taking care of its children, says the head of a statewide group, but there are still ripples in the data pool that suggest challenges just beneath the surface.

That was the view of Linda Tilly, executive director of Voices for Alabama's Children, on Friday - the day Voices released the 2008 Kids Count Data Book.

The book compares kids across the state in terms of health, education, safety and economic security, among other things.

Here's some of the good news:

Slightly more than 10,000 children lived in poverty here in 2006, the latest data year. That was down from 12,005 in 2000, ranking Madison County second-best in the state in this statistic.

The county is promoting an overwhelming 96 percent of its first-graders to second grade - a key indicator of early readiness for school that predicts success later - and is graduating 74 percent of its high school students.

The number of children with indications of abuse or neglect is down from 621 in 2004-2005 to 488 in 2006-2007.

"In Madison County," Tilly said, "children are doing better by far than most other counties."

Despite Alabama's perennial position near the end of the national well-being train, that isn't like being one car before the caboose, either, Tilly agreed. In many study areas, Madison County exceeds national averages, as well.

For all the good news in the statistics, Tilly also pointed to two "interesting" facts that the people of Madison County might wonder about:

The median income in Madison has actually dropped from \$53,637 in 2000 to \$50,522 in 2006, the last year studied.

Of the 258 teens confined to the juvenile detention home here at the time of the study, 215 of them were confined for something other than violent acts.

"Most people would be surprised to see those numbers as big as they are," Tilly said, referring to similar confinement statistics throughout the state.

The juvenile detention system has increasingly become used for housing children "acting out" for a variety of reasons, Tilly said, and that will only make their situations worse.

"We need to do things differently," Tilly said, acknowledging that Madison County District Court Judge Lynn Sherrod "has been speaking out on this."

Among the other findings in the 2008 Kids Count book:

The number of children born to unmarried teens is down from 9.6 percent of births to 7.9 percent. That's a drop from 364 to 322 in real numbers.