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Child poverty rate drops but still high

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MONTGOMERY — The number and percentage of Alabama children in poverty decreased statewide and in Etowah County between 1995 and 2006 but it increased an alarming 42 percent in Marshall County, the VOICES for Alabama's Children Kids County 2008 data book released last week shows.

The number of children in poverty dropped statewide from 291,046 in 1995 to 260,919 in 2006, from 26.4 percent to 24.3 percent of the state's child population.

"That's good," said Linda Tilly, executive director of VOICES for Alabama Children.

The bad news is the statistics are from a period of state economic growth before the effect of the current economic downturn can be measured.

The VOICES annual report and a new report by Alabama Arise show that poverty continues to affect a significant portion of the 1.2 million children in Alabama's 67 counties.

One of the largest increases between 1995 and 2006 occurred in Marshall County where 28.7 percent of the county's children lived in poverty in 2006.

The number of Marshall County children in poverty increased from 4,184 to 5,976 two years ago, VOICES said.

Marshall County's overall population gained only 5,000 since 2000 and its child population gained only 1,300 between 2000 and 2006. Different benchmark years were used for child poverty and populations, VOICES said. The number of children in poverty in Etowah County decreased 19 percent from 6,569 in 1995 to 5,327 in 2006, VOICES said. The 5,327 was 23 percent of the county's children under age 19.

The number of children living in poverty also increased in Cherokee, DeKalb and St. Clair counties.

In Cherokee County, the number of children living in poverty increased from 1,128 in 1995 to 1,307 in 2006. The 1,307 was 25.5 percent of the number of children under 19.

In DeKalb County the number of children living in poverty increased from 3,245 in 1995 to 3,994 in 2006, or 25 percent of the children in DeKalb.

The number of children in poverty increased from 3,228 to 3,276 in St. Clair County between 1995 and 2006. The latter number was 19.8 percent of the population of children under 19.

Affecting the numbers were a changing federal poverty threshold, a changing population and changing median family incomes.

Alabama Arise says despite economic growth between 2002 and 2006, one-third of Alabama families are considered working poor.

"You have the federal poverty threshold that widely acknowledges how much is not enough, and if you're below that point you don't have enough to get by," Alabama Arise policy analyst Chris Sanders said.

While poverty does not directly touch all families in Alabama, the reports are blueprints for action at the state and federal levels where policy changes can affect poverty.

"As state leaders grapple with the challenges of a downturn, they need to remember that a third of our families have been hurting for a long time," Alabama Arise Policy Project senior analyst Ron Gilbert said.

Both Alabama Arise and VOICES have agendas to meet the challenges of poverty.

Alabama Arise's 2009 priorities include removing the state 4 percent sales tax on food, eliminating the federal income tax deduction on state income taxes, and increasing the state income tax threshold to \$20,000 for a family of four.

"There's a need for greater investment ... more investment for child care and work force development, health care," Sanders said.

VOICES' Tilly said she is intrigued by a European-style system to help children like Social Security helped ease poverty for seniors in the United States.

She said Congress should consider individual children saving accounts to be used when they're young adults for education, starting small businesses, or buying homes.

"It's time for our federal government to look at how other counties have reduced poverty and put it on our agenda," Tilly said.

At the state level, the Legislature should continue to fund successful education programs such as Alabama Reading Initiative, the math and science initiative and pre-kindergarten.

"It's not going to change poverty right now but in a generation it will make a huge impact," Tilly said.