

Report: Mobile is bad for kids

Posted by Rena Havner, Staff Reporter October 16, 2008 6:39 AM

Mobile County ranks near the bottom, and Baldwin County is near the top in Alabama when it comes to overall child well-being, according to a new report released by Voices for Alabama's Children.

Mobile County placed 52nd among the 67 counties in the state, while Baldwin County finished 12th. Mobile was hindered by factors that included its lagging high-school graduation rate, high juvenile crime rate and the large number of children living in poverty and in single-parent homes.

"Ultimately, how well we take care of our children and how well we give them a chance to reach their full potential will determine the vitality of our cities, our counties and our state," said Linda Tilly, executive director of Voices for Alabama's Children, a nonprofit group in Montgomery.

"It'll determine what kind of workforce we have. It'll determine what kind of consumer base we have down the road. It'll determine how attractive our state is or our city or our county is for other people to come here. And it'll determine our quality of life."

The poverty rate for children in Mobile County is 31 percent, compared to 19 percent in Baldwin.

Children who grow up in poverty are prone to difficult experiences, the report emphasized: They generally have less access to health care, Tilly said, and are more likely to drop out of school and land in the juvenile justice system and possibly jail.

Jayne Carson, coordinator of Mobile County's Helping Families Initiative, said efforts are under way to battle the poverty cycle.

"Those things are happening in our community, but it's not moving like a well-oiled machine just yet," Carson said. "If we can get these kids a good education and provide them with role models that teach them that good work ethic, then we'll get them through life with success."

Tilly said that Helping Families ? which connects troubled schoolchildren with social service agencies to address underlying problems, such as abuse or mental illness ? is an outstanding program that is being modeled elsewhere in the state.

The Voices report is an extension of the national Kids Count data book, published by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in Washington, D.C. That study ranked Alabama 47th for child well-being, above New Mexico, Louisiana and Mississippi.

According to the Voices report:

Seventeen percent of Mobile's families are considered "vulnerable," meaning the children were born to unmarried teenage mothers who had not finished high school. The Baldwin number is 10 percent, and the state average is 12 percent.

The graduation rate in Mobile County's public schools is 59 percent, which is 6 percentage points lower than the state average. Baldwin's graduation rate is 67 percent.

Mobile County had twice as many juveniles arrested for violent crimes as the state average. Last year, 295 out of every 100,000 juveniles were arrested for violent crimes, compared to 94 in Baldwin County.

Tilly said Voices for Alabama's Children is looking hard at the juvenile justice data this year. That's because the Legislature recently passed the Alabama Juvenile Justice Act, which encourages judges to find other ways than jail to deal with youths charged with non-violent crimes.

Carmen Bosch, Baldwin County's juvenile judge, supports that philosophy. Baldwin's poverty rate is relatively low. But Bosch said she sees too many children who are charged with drug- and alcohol-related crimes.

An alternative to jail, she said, is sending them to a residential rehabilitation center in hopes that they overcome their substance abuse and addictions.

"Our children are well provided for. They have many of the tools for success," Bosch said. "But we have problems with substance abuse. We need to put resources into helping these children and their families."