



# PRESS-REGISTER

## Pay attention to kids for the good of us all

Saturday, October 18, 2008

SOUTH ALABAMA has a split personality when it comes to the quality of life for its young people, according to Voices for Alabama's Children, which is part of the national Kids Count project.

Mobile County ranks near the bottom of the state's counties, at 52nd. Across Mobile Bay, Baldwin County ranks near the top, at 12th.

Nevertheless, both counties could and should do better.

Linda Tilly, executive director of Voices for Alabama's Children, made the point well in a recent Press-Register story: "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."

With that in mind, Mobile County especially and Baldwin County to some extent threaten their futures by ignoring the needs of their children.

Mobile County does worse than Baldwin County in large part because Mobile has a greater rate of poverty. Nearly a third of Mobile County's children are poor.

That may improve, thankfully, as new jobs move into the county

In Baldwin County, about 19 percent of children live in poverty.

Shamefully, the rest of Alabama is doing even worse. Alabama ranks 47th out of the 50 states. Thank God for Mississippi, Louisiana and New Mexico, or our state would be at the bottom.

As bad as Alabama does, Mobile County does worse than the state average in three areas:

--The percentage of "vulnerable" families — children born to unmarried teenage mothers who had not finished high school — was 17 percent last year, compared to the state average of 12 percent. Baldwin's rate was 10 percent.

--Mobile County's high school graduation rate was only 59 percent, compared to the state's 65 percent. Baldwin's rate was 67 percent.

--Mobile County had double the state average of juveniles arrested for violent crimes, with 295 out of every 100,000 juveniles. Baldwin County's rate was 94 out of every 100,000.

Unfortunately, there's no magic solution to enduring social problems like high rates of poverty, which lead to a host of problems for children. Communities and the state can commit to funding a variety of programs and projects, however, and non-governmental agencies and churches have a role to play as well.

Much is being done, of course. In fact, the condition of Alabama's children is improving in small ways when compared to past years. The state's school systems are doing a better job, and programs are doing much to combat teen pregnancy and other problems.

In addition, Alabama is revamping its juvenile justice system. Minors arrested for nonviolent crimes, such as possession of drugs, will be sent to community group homes instead of being incarcerated.

Moreover, Mobile's "Helping Families" program, which connects troubled kids to social service agencies, can be a model that has great potential for all of Alabama.

©2008 Mobile

© 2008 al.com All Rights Reserved.