

Meth tied to abuse, neglect reports here

By CHARLES WHISENANT - The Arab Tribune

For the third year in a row, when it comes to the number of children who are abused or neglected, Marshall County ranks dead last in Alabama. That, according to experts, is directly tied to crystal meth.

The numbers are according to the Alabama Kids Count data book published and compiled by Voices for Alabama's Children. Marshall County Presiding Circuit Judge Howard Hawk says the numbers does not surprise him.

The ranking is based on the number of reported cases in 2006, the year that Hawk says the meth problem in Marshall County peaked.

There were 476 reports of abuse or neglect in the county that year.

Twelve years ago, the number of dependency cases - those where DHR had to step in to remove a child - was 78, Hawk said. In 2006, that number was 535.

"More than 70 percent of the parents in those cases tested positive for some kind of drugs, and most of that was crystal meth," Hawk said.

The numbers have dropped off a little since 2006, but not in massive amounts.

"I think we are still in the high 400s," he said. "But, I think we are starting to turn the corners thanks to various programs, such as the Fatherhood Initiative and others, that we put into place because we saw this coming."

Hawk said he recalls two cases in particular, both coincidentally in 2006, in which he had to place children with great-grandparents, because the parents and grandparents tested positive for meth.

"Marshall County has had some bad numbers when it comes to children and meth, but we are known for implementing programs to fight it that other counties don't have," he said.

Overall, Marshall County dropped from 18th to 24th best in Alabama when it comes to the overall well-being of children, according to the Voices report.

Blount County ranked second best overall in the state for well-being for the second year in a row.

Morgan County dropped from sixth best to 25th best, and Cullman County dropped one notch from seventh best to eighth best.

All four of the Brindley Mountain area counties ranked in the top half of the state's 67 counties in overall well-being, but the state as a whole climbed one spot from 48th to 47th in the country.

The Voices report ranks counties in the state based on nine indicators of child well-being, including education and quality-of-life issues.

Data is collected from the state departments of education, health and human resources.

The top 10 counties in child well-being are: Shelby, Blount, Cleburn, Madison, Lee, Marion, Franklin, Cullman, St. Clair and Walker.

The bottom 10 are Hale, Sumter, Russell, Macon, Wilcox, Lowndes, Bullock, Greene, Perry and Dallas.

State rankings for Brindley Mountain's four-county area include:

n Marshall County

The county does better in other categories, including: third in first grade retention, and ninth in low weight births.

The report predicts that 27 first graders will be held back this school year in the county. That number ranks Marshall County third in the state, an improvement from 16th last year.

The report shows that Marshall County has 87,644 people, with 23,851, or 27.4 percent of those being children.

It also says that Marshall County's average family income is \$34,668, that 18.7 percent of the population lives below the poverty level.

Other rankings for Marshall County include (last year's rankings in parentheses):

- ☒ 35 - Infant mortality (45);
- ☒ 9 - Low birth weights (12);
- ☒ 20 - Births to unmarried teens (22);
- ☒ 22 - Single parent families with children (29);

n Cullman County

The population is 80,554, with 20,320, or 25.3 percent being children.

Cullman's average family income is \$36,693, and 14.7 percent of its residents live below the poverty level.

Other Cullman rankings are:

- ☒ 61 - Indications of child abuse or neglect (60);
- ☒ 5 - Infant mortality rate (5);
- ☒ 7 - Low birth weights (16);
- ☒ 14 - Births to unmarried teens (12);

n Blount County

Of 56,614 residents, 14,599, or 25.9 percent, are children. The average household income is \$40,588, and 11.4 percent of the residents live below the poverty level.

Other Blount County numbers include:

- ☒ 16 - Indications of abuse or neglect (13);
- ☒ 20 - Infant mortality (28);
- ☒ 1 - Low birth weights (5);
- ☒ 3 - Births to unmarried teens (9);

n Morgan County

It is the most populated of the four Brindley area counties with 115,050 people. Of that, 30,312, or 26.3 percent, are children.

The average family income is \$41,339, and 14 percent of the population lives below the poverty level.

Other Morgan County rankings are:

- ☒ 52 - Indications of abuse or neglect (53);
- ☒ 26 - Infant mortality (26);
- ☒ 23 - Low birth weights (11);
- ☒ 23 - Births to unmarried teens (22);

n Alabama

The state ranked worse than all but three others when it comes to children's well being.

The state's population grew to 4,627,851, with 1,240,643, or 27 percent of them being children.

The average family income is \$36,936, and 16.9 percent of the population lives below the poverty level.

Other Alabama statistics are:

- ☒ 8.9 - Indications of abuse or neglect per 1,000 children (9.3);
- ☒ 9.0 deaths per 1,000 live births (8.7);
- ☒ 10.5 percent of babies born were under weight (10.5);
- ☒ 10.2 percent of babies were born to unmarried teens (9.6);
- ☒ 156.4 teens per 100,000 were arrested for other violent crimes (144.4);

For more statistics, call: 1-800-444-KIDS (5437); or visit www.alavoices.org.