

State child poverty rate drops Despite decline, numbers are still high

By [Dana Beyerle](#)

Montgomery Bureau

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MONTGOMERY - The percentage of Alabama children in poverty dropped by almost 10 percent between 1995 and 2006, but only one northwest Alabama county enjoyed that degree of success.

VOICES for Alabama Children's "Kids Count 2008," which was released last week, shows the number of children in poverty dropped statewide from 291,046 in 1995 to 260,919 in 2006.

Percentage-wise, the drop during that time is from 26.4 percent to 24.3 percent of the state's child population. Children are defined as anyone under 19.

"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 and before the effects of the current economic downturn. 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.

The number of children living in poverty between 1995 and 2006 dropped in Lawrence County, but increased slightly in Colbert, Franklin and Lauderdale counties.

In Lauderdale County in 1995, 4,028 children lived in poverty. Eleven years later, 5,006 children lived in poverty, or 27.2 percent of the county's children as of 2006.

The VOICES data book did not show the 1995 population.

In Colbert County in 1995, there were 2,742 children living in poverty.

Eleven years later, the number of children in poverty had grown slightly to 2,769, equaling 23.5 percent of the children population in 2006.

In Franklin County, the percentage of children living in poverty increased 7 percent between 1995 and 2006, from 1,736 to 1,858, or 26 percent of the county's children.

The good news involved Lawrence County, where the percentage of children living in poverty dropped 18 percent between 1995 and 2006, from 2,158 to 1,768, or 22 percent of the county's children.

Affecting the numbers were the changing federal poverty threshold, a changing population and changing median family incomes. Despite economic growth between 2002 and 2006, Alabama Arise says 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," said Alabama Arise Policy Analyst Chris Sanders.

While poverty does not directly touch all families in Alabama, the reports serve as 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," said Alabama Arise Policy Project Senior Analyst Ron Gilbert.

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 for child care and work force development, health care," Sanders said.

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 countries have reduced poverty and put it on our agenda," Tilly said. At the state level, she said the Legislature should continue to fund successful education programs such as Alabama Reading Initiative, the math and science initiative and pre-kindergarten program.

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

Dana Beyerle can be reached at (334) 264-6605.