

## Black Belt counties fare worst in study of children's issues Income key element in well-being of child

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TUSCALOOSA | One out of every four children in Tuscaloosa County is living in poverty, according to the annual Kids Count study released today.

Child poverty rates in the Black Belt are even higher. In Perry County, about 46 percent — nearly half — of all children live in households below the federal poverty level. In Sumter County, the rate is 45 percent.

High poverty rates have a high correlation to infant mortality rates, low graduation rates and high rates of juvenile crime, all issues that the study examines, said Linda Tilly, executive director of VOICES for Alabama's Children, an advocacy group. The Alabama Kids Count Data Book, released today by VOICES, is an annual report used by legislators and nonprofit groups looking at areas in children's health and well-being that need improvement, Tilly said.

The study gives a county-by-county snapshot, assessing which counties have done better and which are faring worse, based on the most recent data information available.

Overall, the Black Belt counties have the highest infant mortality rates, the lowest birth rates, the highest number of births to unmarried teens and the lowest graduations rates — all issues that correlate to high poverty levels.

Donald Williamson, state health officer for the Alabama Department of Public Health, said he's not surprised that Black Belt counties rank among the worst in many categories assessing children's health.

"It's not surprising, and the reason it's not is that if you go back 30 years, the best predictor of health of the population is their income," Williamson said.

The counties that ranked highest on children's health issues were often the counties with the highest household incomes, including Madison, Shelby and Baldwin counties.

Tuscaloosa County was ranked 39th overall, in the median category on children's issues, including education, safety, security and health. It was one of the worst counties in infant mortality rates. According to 2006 data, out of every 1,000 live births, about 10.2 infants younger than one year die.

One reason the infant mortality rate is so high is because there is a large percentage of expectant mothers who are uninsured and do not seek prenatal care, Williamson said.

"The economy has turned down so dramatically and there are not as many women with insurance," Williamson said. Alabama ranks as one of the best states nationally in the percentage of children with medical insurance, due mostly to government programs insuring children, such as ALLKids. Expectant mothers are not covered under such programs.

Williamson hopes to change that by extending the ALLKids program to unborn children who would qualify for the insurance program later. That means that uninsured women who do not seek prenatal care could receive health insurance through the ALLKids program.

"This serves to give us healthier babies and help rural hospitals who are hurting because of uncompensated care," Williamson said. He plans to ask the Alabama Legislature to tackle the issue in the next year. Williamson estimated that the cost to the state would be between \$1 million to \$1.5 million a year, but added that it would save the state money later because there would likely be a corresponding drop in the number of low-weight births and the infant mortality rate.

The Kids Count study also examined graduation rates and the number of youths incarcerated in juvenile detention centers. Tuscaloosa County's graduation rate is higher than most Black Belt counties, at 64.4 percent, about the same as the statewide average of 64.9 percent.

Greene County's graduation rate was 51 percent, meaning that about half of all ninth-graders who started high school during the 2003-04 school year actually graduated. In Bibb County, the graduation rate was 55.1 percent.

A new factor that the annual study also examined were the number of youths committed to juvenile detention centers. In Tuscaloosa County, 156 youths were committed in 2007. Of those, 82.7 percent were for non-violent crimes. About 14.7 percent were for crimes considered violent under the FBI's definition, the study said.

The high number of youths admitted in the juvenile detention system — 3,114 statewide in 2007 — could dramatically affect the state later through higher levels of crime and violence, and higher rates of poverty and low education, Tilly said.

"We want people who live in the counties to ask why, why is this happening but also what does this mean for me, my county, city and state," Tilly said of the study's results.

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(Dusty Compton / Tuscaloosa News)  
Jadore Shannon, 5, lies on the examination table as nurse practitioner Gayle Griffin-Moussa, second from right, talks to Jadore's mother, Melonese Shannon, 22, and sister Treney Shannon, 3, about Jadore's sinus infection at Maude L. Whatley Health Center in Tuscaloosa.