

## More children living in poverty

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Nearly 8,000 children in Dallas County slipped into poverty last year, a 4 percent increase over 2009.

This growing mass of poverty-stricken children - 192,502 in 2010 - was the grim portrait painted by the biannual report on children released Monday by Children's Medical Center Dallas.

"Almost 30 percent of Dallas County kids are living in poverty," noted Christopher J. Durovich, president and chief executive of Children's, which has commissioned the report since 1996.

Such children are defined as living in households with an annual income below the federal poverty level, which for a family of four was \$22,350 last year.

The 88-page report, prepared by the Institute for Urban Policy Research at the University of Texas at Dallas, noted that children who grow up in poverty face higher risks of cognitive, emotional, educational and health problems.

It focused on 61 health and other indicators culled from state, federal and local data.

But the report, *Beyond ABC: Accessing Children's Health in Dallas County*, also found some positive indicators of how local children were faring, starting with those born last year.

For example, premature births were down 9 percent, low birth-weight deliveries were reduced by 17 percent and pregnancies among 13- to 17-year-olds fell by 7 percent. And teen suicides were reduced by more than half, from 14 to six.

In the negative column, however, the report also found fewer 2-year-olds being immunized on schedule; more cases of sexually transmitted diseases being reported among those under age 20; and more children being hospitalized for diabetes at Children's Medical Center Dallas.

But even as the number of needy children has grown, the report also found that state and federal programs were providing a range of services to more and more children.

For example, eligibility for free- and reduced-cost school lunch programs grew by 3 percent last year to include 325,855 local children. That means 70 percent of all children in Dallas County public schools qualified for the lunch program.

The report also found significantly more children in the county being covered by Medicaid.

The state-federal insurance program picked up an additional 40,000 kids under age 19 last year, raising its coverage for Dallas County from 217,000 children in 2009 to 257,000 in 2010.

Generally, Medicaid coverage allows children to access health care from certain doctors and community clinics, rather than resorting to hospital emergency room visits when they have non-urgent illnesses.

"Our emergency room is now available to children who are acutely ill or injured," Durovich noted.

However, the county's expanding Medicaid coverage "is nothing to be proud of," he said.

"The number of kids who don't have access to health insurance in Dallas County is down to just under 18 percent,"

Durovich said. "But it's still more than two times the national average of 8 percent uninsured."

Since 2000, Medicaid coverage for Dallas County children has increased threefold, the report noted. However, many other children qualify for the program but do not access it.

An estimated 1 million low-income Texas families meet Medicaid's income guidelines but never enroll their children in the program.

"A significant number of families with low incomes do not realize that their children are eligible for Medicaid," concluded the Children's report, "or the families are unable to complete the application process, which can be quite cumbersome."

Durovich said his medical center has built its mission around making life better for such children, regardless of their insurance status.

"Every child deserves the opportunity to fulfill their promise and their potential," he said. "We are the safety net for those children."

#### AT A GLANCE Children's health

Some key findings from Beyond ABC: Accessing Children's Health in Dallas County:

##### The big picture

70 percent of children in public schools were eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch.

29 percent of children were in families whose income was below the federal poverty level.

18 percent of all children in the county had no public or private health insurance coverage.

##### Changes from 2009 to 2010

Number of children whose families got temporary assistance from state: Up 28%

Number of 2-year-olds who were fully vaccinated: Down 6%

Cases of sexually transmitted diseases among people under age 20: Up 6%

Number of kids enrolled in Head Start programs: Up 5%

Number of children hospitalized at Children's for diabetes: Up 4%

**Caption:** CHART(S): AT A GLANCE Children's health

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