

Child Poverty Rising, Report Says

By Annie Gowen

Washington Post Staff Writer

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A growing number of American children are living in poverty and with unemployed parents, and are facing the threat of hunger, according to a federal report released yesterday.

According to the report, "America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being," 18 percent of all children 17 and younger were living in poverty in 2007, up from 17 percent in 2006. The percentage of children with at least one parent working full time was 77 percent in 2007, down from 78 percent in 2006. Those living in households where parents described children as being hungry, having skipped a meal or having gone without eating for an entire day increased from 0.6 percent in 2006 to 0.9 percent in 2007, the report said.

Federal officials said the statistics predate the current economic downturn, and forecast harder times for some of the country's 74 million children 17 and younger.

"It foreshadows greater changes we'll see when we look at these figures next year," said Duane Alexander, director of the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development at the National Institutes of Health, one of the government agencies that participated in the study.

The report is an annual compilation of statistics on child welfare from several agencies, including the Census Bureau. It tracks trends in family life, health care, safety and education. Despite the small changes, the government said it reported only developments that were greater than the study's margin of error.

Drawing on previously released Census data, the report painted a picture of a young population holding steady at about 24 percent, a proportion not expected to change through 2021.

But the report also showed that younger Americans' racial and ethnic backgrounds and living circumstances are undergoing dramatic shifts. The percentage of children who are Hispanic, for example, has increased faster than for any other racial or ethnic group, from 9 percent of the population in 1980 to 22 percent in 2008.

In 2007, 40 percent of all children were born to unmarried women, up from 34 percent in 2002, according to the report, which reiterated a federal study of birth certificates released this year.

Experts say that trend reflects the lessening stigma of unwed motherhood, an increase in the number of couples who delay or forgo marriage and growing numbers of women who want to have babies on their own. At the same time, the teen pregnancy rate rose slightly for the second year in a row, to 22.2 per 1,000 girls ages 15 to 17, after years of decline.

Alexander said there were some bright spots in this year's report, beginning with the finding that 89 percent of children had private or government-funded health insurance in 2007, up from 88 percent in 2006.

Experts are hoping that a very slight decline in the number of infants born preterm or with low birth weights after years of steady increases also could be the beginning of a trend. Preterm births were 12.7 percent of the total, down from 12.8 percent in 2006, and the proportion of low-birth-weight infants was 8.2 percent, down from 8.3 percent in 2006.

"The exciting thing is that in almost two decades, this is the first chance we've seen of a possible turnaround," Alexander said.

The report also showed that an estimated 14 percent of all children have special health-care needs. The most commonly reported conditions included allergies, asthma, attention deficit disorder, depression and headaches.