

Issues that bring risk into focus

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Statesman Journal

July 27, 2008

The five critical issues the Statesman Journal will examine during the next five months reach across all aspects of the lives of our area's youths.

Stability

A major part of any child's stability is their home, the place where they eat, sleep, spend time with family and grow. But many local children don't have that foundation.

Family conflict and instability — such as abuse and neglect, or a parent with an addiction or who is unemployed — have led to more youths moving around, staying in shelters, sleeping in cars and couch surfing between friends' places. Some end up homeless because their families have lost their homes.

In 2006-07, at least 1,265 students enrolled in schools in Marion and Polk counties were runaway or homeless, according to the Oregon Department of Education.

The Salem-Keizer School District identified 901 homeless or unaccompanied school-age youths during the 2007-08 school year. That's 2.2 percent of the district's students, up from 1.7 percent the previous year.

Salem Police arrested 721 runaway juveniles last year, up from 694 in 2006.

"It's a growing problem," said Peggy Kahan, the program director of HOME Youth and Resource Center in Salem, a day shelter and drop-in center for at-risk youths. "It's a hidden problem."

On the streets, children face countless other risks that range from drugs to prostitution. Many drop out of school, while some turn to crime to sustain their basic needs.

"They're victims out there," Kahan said. "They're still children whether they're 13 or 16. There are predators out there."

Between 1999 and 2006, the child poverty rate increased from 18.8 percent to 20.1 percent in Marion County and from 13 percent to 16 percent in Polk County.

"Poverty affects kids in a big way," Marion County Commissioner Janet Carlson said. "It affects them in basic needs, nutrition, whether they get a meal."

More families are relying on food assistance these days. The number of emergency food boxes distributed in Marion and Polk counties has jumped 15 percent in the last year, said Phil McCorkle, the development director for Marion-Polk Food Share. That's an average of 777 more families per month.

About 44 percent of the people eating from food boxes are children — about 9,000 children per



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Miguel Torres and his 3-year-old son Miguel Jr. sit in the makeshift living room at St. Joseph Catholic Church's gym. The church is part of The Salem Interfaith Hospitality Network, which provides emergency shelter for homeless families.

month, McCorkle said.

"It's a tough time for a lot of people," he said. "Kids depend on the family for their food for the most part. When the families struggle, the kids are going to be sucked right along with that."

The effect of poverty, though, isn't limited to a child's nutrition. If a house loses electricity because bills can't be paid, a child may not be able to do homework in the evening. Or if a family can't afford transportation, doctor's appointments may be missed.

Parents who are continually looking for work end up moving from place to place, forcing children to change schools, neighborhoods and friends.

Early care & development

Oregon is the least affordable state in the nation for preschool-age care. And both Marion and Polk counties rank near the bottom statewide for child-care availability.

In 1998, there were about 1,200 child-care providers in Marion, Polk and Yamhill counties listed in Child Care Information Service's database, said Jon Reeves, a program director of the child care resource and referral agency.

That number has shrunk to about 800 today.

At the same time, the number of annual births in the three counties has grown 8 percent since 2001.

"We still have a supply problem, and we need to find a way to get that on an upturn again," Reeves said.

The more rural the area, the harder it gets to find child care in the region, he said. Child care for infants — who cost more to care for — also has become less available as child-care centers have closed their infant rooms during the past several years.

For providers, the main issue remains a lack of health insurance, vacation and other employee benefits, said Faye Zepeda, a staff representative for Child Care Providers Together, AFSCME Local 132. Benefits would help the union recruit and retain providers, she said.

There also are long waiting lists for spots in Head Start and all-day kindergarten, which provide a foundation for learning many children don't get at home.

"Our biggest issue is our 0- to 7-year-olds," said Eduardo Angulo, the chairman of the Salem/Keizer Coalition for Equality, which advocates for poor and minority children.

"Kids in fifth, sixth and seventh grade are reading and writing two or three grades behind. They're the targets of the gang culture because these kids feel there is not much incentive for them to be in school," Angulo said.

"If we help our children at an early age, and help parents help our children, we will have social capital so enormous in the next 20 years."

Child welfare

The problem of child abuse and neglect has been the focus of much attention in the Salem area, and it's no surprise given the numbers.

Eighty children per month go into foster care in Marion County, but only 75 leave.

"So there's always more coming in than going out. It's always in crisis," said Jim Seymour, the director of Catholic Community Services, referring to the foster care system.

If the trend continues, close to 2,000 Marion County children will be in foster care by 2020, Seymour said. About 1,100 children in the county are in foster care now.

"Every time a kid moves involuntarily, that really destabilizes them," he said.

In 2006, 1,903 children were confirmed victims of abuse or neglect in Marion and Polk counties. Nearly half were younger than 6.

About 70 percent of cases are related to the methamphetamine crisis. Last year, in Salem alone, 510 children who were exposed to meth were taken into protective custody.

Sue Miller, the executive director of Family Building Blocks, said an upsurge in cases could be on the horizon as it becomes more difficult for families living in poverty to keep up with the rising cost of everything from energy to food.

"The problem is not going away," she said.

More support also is needed for foster care parents, said Josh Graves, director of youth and family services at Catholic Community Services. That includes foster parent nights out, money for special events, and respite providers, who give foster parents breaks of a few hours to a few days.

The goal is to reduce foster parent turnover, thereby reducing the amount of change in children's lives.

"We really need people to invest time, energy and quite frankly funding into our foster support system," Graves said.

Health

In Marion and Polk counties, one in six children don't have health insurance. That's 25 percent worse than the state average.

While there are clinics that provide free or low-cost care, such as West Salem Clinic, uninsured children often go without regular medical checkups or dental exams. Problems such as steady weight gain or poor eyesight aren't caught early on.

"If you delay, you have more of a problem," said Pam Heilman, a public health division director for Marion County.

A lack of basic health care can exacerbate other problems, whether they are mental-health issues or substance abuse problems, said Marybeth Beall, a behavior health division director with Marion County.

An adolescent drug user, for example, could self-medicate instead of seeking treatment.

In Marion County, teen pregnancy also is a concern. In 2006, 745 teens ages 15 to 19 were pregnant, which equates to about 72 of every 1,000 in that age group. The county's pregnancy rate falls behind only smaller Jefferson and Malheur counties.

Teenagers' prospects tend to decline when they give birth. The same goes for their children. Teen mothers, for example, are more likely to live in poverty than other teenagers.

"It's more difficult for them to finish their education, so they often end up in lower wage jobs," Carlson said. "That's where the poverty cycle happens."

Pregnant teens are more likely to smoke and less likely to get prenatal care than older women, which can pose risks to the health of their babies.

Youth development

Gang activity is on the rise in the Salem-Keizer area, those in the trenches say.

There's been a dramatic increase in graffiti complaints, more students are adopting the trappings of gang culture, and more gang-related crimes have been occurring. Prevention workers say they're now seeing gangs recruiting at the elementary school level.

Compared to the mid-1990s, the Marion County Juvenile Department has seen about a 50 percent increase in the number of kids affiliated with gangs in its caseloads, said Chuck Sybrandt, the department's assistant director.

The youths involved with gangs, he said, are more sophisticated than before.

"I think they're more organized … It's much more controlled (and) underground," Sybrandt said.

Last year, the Salem Police Department's gang response team dealt with about 600 documented gang members affiliated with about 25 different gang sets.

Gang members in Salem are becoming increasingly younger, and female membership in gangs is on the rise, police say.

Reported incidents of graffiti in Salem rose more than 20 percent last year, from 2,846 cases in 2006 to 3,449 in 2007. About half of those were gang-related, Salem Police say.

Grffiti reports in Keizer more than tripled, from 85 in 2006 to 273 last year.

Gang involvement reaches every socioeconomic group, Marion County Sheriff Russ Isham said. With it comes a high risk of physical harm — falling victim to crime — and incarceration.

"If they continue the lifestyle of gang involvement, drugs and drinking, they're facing a lifetime in prison," Graves said. "We, as taxpayers, are facing a lifetime of paying for their imprisonment."

Marion and Polk counties have a higher rate of juvenile arrests than the state as a whole. About 2 of every 100 youths younger than 18 are arrested.

More children are being arrested for property crimes than for crimes against people. Kids are vandalizing property, slashing tires, spraying graffiti and shoplifting, Isham said.

"That creates a pretty substantial financial burden on the victims," he said.

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