

Expert Comments On Child Poverty

The recently released [Kids Count](#) report offers extensive data, recommendations and tools on issues related to children and families. It is one of many annual reports that provides a gauge for planners, decision-makers, business leaders, community organizers and caring adults about the health and well-being of children in Kansas.

[Elaine Johannes](#), an associate professor and extension specialist in youth development in the School of Family Studies and Human Services, has extensively researched youth development and recently conducted a Kansas youth health assessment with the Kansas Department of Health and Environment. She discusses the significance of the Kids Count report and what it means for Kansas youth.

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Description of expertise: Research specializations in youth development, healthy lifestyles and community capacity-building

Comments/quotes:

What is the significance of this year's Kids Count report?

The annual report is produced each year for all states by the [Annie E. Casey Foundation](#), which is a recognized, national leader in child well-being. This year's report includes some indicators that the well-being of Kansas children is not improving. For example, it reports that 19 percent of Kansas children — under 18 years of age — live in families with incomes below 100 percent of the [U.S. poverty threshold](#). That means that a family of four is living on less than \$24,250 in annual income.

Why might Kansas be experiencing a rise in childhood poverty?

There are many factors that might be influencing this percentage of increase. The factors may relate to employment opportunities, such as access to fewer above minimum wage jobs; reduced access to safety-net programs, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Family, or TANF, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, housing subsidies and earned childcare tax credit; increased costs of living, such as sales tax, fees and fuel costs; and families experiencing unexpected disruption or trauma. Poverty, be it acute or chronic, is a complex issue that requires complex solutions.

How can we use this report to help to solve the issue of children living in poverty?

The Kansas Kids Count report, along with others, allows us to have focused, data-driven, solution-oriented conversations about difficult issues confronting children and families. The Kids Count report has other information that reveals positive indicators for the well-being of children — especially for adolescents — in Kansas. We need to acknowledge the persistently high poverty among Kansas children, but we also need to recognize some improvements in health, school graduation and other areas.

How does the Kids Count report relate to your recent Kansas youth health assessment with the KDHE?

The Kids Count report provides ongoing affirmation of many things we learned from the Kansas adolescent health assessment, especially from our focus groups. In general, Kansas adolescents reflect the strains and demands that are placed on their families. When parents and caring adults are

working multiple low-wage jobs, it is often the adolescent who provides consistency within the family. Teens may be caring for younger children, preparing meals, taking care of household chores along with bringing in additional income from part-time jobs. Adolescents are stressed by additional demands in home and in school.

Through our 25 focus groups with adolescents across Kansas, we learned of their commitment to academic achievement and high school graduation, along with their attempts to not use drugs, to avoid early pregnancy and to support their families knowing that their parents are stressed. Having limited access to caring adults who can help make sense of their stress and anxiety was a constant theme across the focus groups.

What else should we know about the Kids Count report?

I recommend that we use the report as a motivator for problem-solving. We know the data, so now let's improve the indicators we are not pleased with and sustain the efforts that are making a difference revealed by the positive indicators.