

# Report lists California 40th for children's wellness

Victoria Pelham, The Desert Sun 11:46 p.m. PDT July 21, 2014



(Photo: File Photo)

California is near the bottom of the nation for child well-being in a new report released Tuesday by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Children Now.

While disappointing, health experts said the 40th overall ranking is not surprising.

The state had scores as low as 43rd for families and communities and 48th in economic well-being for its children. Child health was roughly near the middle at 26th. The measure was a slight improvement from last year when California placed 41st, but advocates are still concerned.

"Big picture, ranking 40th nationally on children's well-being is just not acceptable," said Jessica Mindnich, a researcher for Sacramento-based child advocacy group Children Now. "We have more children than any other state in this country, so when kids in California aren't doing well, that has significant implications for kids nationally."

Mindnich said the recession hit California really hard, causing child poverty rates to continue to rise and placing stressors on all the other connected factors for well-being. At the same time, the state had to cut back, so it dismantled many safety-net programs that supported children.

"Our kids are vulnerable," she said.

Tricia Gehrlein, regional director for the Clinton Health Matters Initiative that has helped set a range of holistic health goals valleywide, said children's well-being trends locally are sadly reflective of the state.

"It reminds people we have a long way to go," she said. "This is a very long process."

"It took us a long time to get here and it's going to take us a while to turn it around."

Stella Smith, deputy director of First 5 Riverside, said the picture for children looks "bleak," a cause for concern.

"What it means is we need to make sure we really pay very close attention to the first five years of their life so they develop healthy habits and, by the time they enter school, they have developed these healthy habits," she said.

Gehrlein said challenges to whole-person health for kids locally all boils down to access: the number of pediatricians, doctors available after-hours for parents who work, access to affordable, healthy foods in valley-wide food deserts, family and social support — things that keep them well enough to focus at school and reach their potential.

She said if there would be one priority for the valley's children, it would be improving access.

"If you think about children like a garden — do they have fertile ground?" Mindnich said. "Family and community, economic well-being, ensuring they have access to health care and high-quality education is kind of like the water and the sunlight."

"We need to make sure all of those things are in place because if one is missing, you really can't have a healthy child."

The report showed that 24 percent of children lived in poverty in California. This was only worse in New Mexico and Mississippi. It pointed out that a lack of resources can cause parents to struggle to meet their children's basic needs and lead to parental stress, teen pregnancy and low high school graduation rates.

"For them, their parents may have to think a little bit longer before taking them to doctor if there's a copay or prescription that has to be filled," Mindnich said, adding that this puts these kids at greater risk. "They're watching every penny."

Locally, 48.7 percent of valley children live below or at the poverty line, or 34,595 kids, according to 2013 data from the Health Assessment Resource Center. An additional 23.8 percent fall below 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

About 78 percent of students valley-wide receive free or reduced lunches at the area's three school districts.

In the Coachella Valley, nutrition is a major issue for children, tied to socioeconomic status, education and absenteeism rates and other well-being

factors, experts said.

"A lot of the times, it's easier, quicker to grab something that's not as healthy to feed your child and in many cases less expensive," Smith said.

She pointed out work that the Riverside County Department of Public Health has been doing to incentivize mom-and-pop stores in the valley and making healthier foods available.

It's a matter of creating the demand for it, also making it affordable and if there's a demand for it, then people will be able to carry it because it won't stay on the shelf so long. It's all those things working together, Smith said.

Gehrlein said many families in parts of the valley only have access to smaller markets or convenience stores for their shopping, stores that charge quite a bit more for, say, a gallon of milk than at a grocery store. This can lead families to look at cutting items out entirely or buying less healthy options.

And a cut in federal dollars for food stamps last year could hurt the situation for the valley's children even more, she said.

"It makes those choices even more difficult for parents trying to make healthy sources for children," Gehrlein said.

This can lead to both malnutrition and weight gains in children when they are eating unhealthy food.

In the Coachella Valley, about 10.5 percent of children are underweight, with 12.7 percent considered overweight and 27.1 percent obese, HARC data shows.

"If we don't have that safety net and don't have those basic needs met — and I would consider food a very basic need — they really can't do all of the other things we want them to do such as going to school, learning, being physically active and outdoors," Smith said.

California ranked 39th out of 50 for education.

"With a strong and healthy beginning, children can more easily stay on track to remain in school and graduate, pursue postsecondary education and training and successfully transition to adulthood," the report said. "Yet the U.S. continues to have significant gaps in education."

Smith said locally and statewide, the groundwork for improvement in education is being laid with the implementation of Common Core standards and science standards, as well as a commitment to early-childhood education, but they need to increase investments.

The report pointed to childhood health affecting school readiness and attendance.

And the state's low rankings in family and community point back to poverty rates during a "stressful" economic time, Mindnich said. This places burdens on families that can lead to divorce, a lack of communication and parental attention, high teen birth rates and other problems.

Parent discussions with children in the Coachella Valley about topics such as drugs and alcohol and gangs or violence decreased between 2007 and 2013, according to HARC data.

The Kids Count data does show improvements in teen birth rates in California though, whose aggressive policies led to a 63 percent decline in teen births between 1990 and 2012.

Direct child health care in California was much higher than other categories, at 26th, which could be linked to the state taking the lead on the Affordable Care Act and insuring its children. Health insurance was one of the main indicators.

About 90.2 percent of valley children are insured under some kind of plan, much higher than the valley's adult rates.

Valley health experts are hopeful about how insurance can improve access for all residents, but they cautioned that there are also barriers once they are insured.

The next step is really access and making sure we have built out a robust system of providers.

About 25.2 percent of valley parents, or more than 18,000 people, who had taken their children to the doctor in the last year had a problem with the amount of time they had to wait to see a doctor.

A further 15.2 percent, or 11,065 people, had difficulty with the amount of time it took to get an appointment for their child.

"We need that base of care to be available to the children who now have the insurance and their parents' ability to be able to take them," she said.

"(The residency programs) are going to help alleviate it, but it's going to take a while to get that built up and to get the valley to appoint where everyone has access to the health care they need," she said.

Leaders are hopeful well-being for children will improve, though they caution that it will take time, more investments in infrastructure, education and collaboration among agencies.

"Awareness of what it takes to have good health has been increased and that will lead to better outcomes," Gehrlein said. "I think the entire valley is getting behind the idea of health and well-being more and more as the years go by. That will have an effect."

Smith pointed to the importance of educating parents about nutrition, physical activity, and health programs, as well as how to use health insurance once they have it — with preventive care, rather than emergency visits.

She sees the bleak picture for children improving with collaboration among groups like the Clinton Health Matters Initiative, Desert Healthcare District, the Riverside County Department of Public Health and other agencies.

"I would expect us to fare a little bit better, but that just means we have our work cut out for us and we have a good start on that already with the cooperation that's already been taking place," Smith said.

**Children's well-being**

- California ranked 40th for overall child well-being in the U.S.
- Ranked 48th for economic well-being.
- Ranked 39th for education.
- Ranked 26th for health.
- Ranked 43rd for family and community.

The report can be seen at

[www.childrennow.org/2014\\_kcdb](http://www.childrennow.org/2014_kcdb) ([http://www.childrennow.org/2014\\_kcdb](http://www.childrennow.org/2014_kcdb))

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