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**Poverty grips county youth**

BY MARIA HERNE Staff Writer  
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07/09/2004

**One in four of Schuylkill County's children under age 5 lives in poverty.**

According to "The State of the Child in Pennsylvania - 2004, a report recently released by Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children (PPC), one in four children under age 5 lives in a low-income family.

Countywide, 37.8 percent of children under age 18 live below 200 percent of poverty, considered low-income at \$37,700 for a family of four.

"The data in this year's report show that it doesn't necessarily matter where children live," said Joan L. Benso, PPC president and chief executive. "Today, too many children have the odds stacked against them before they even enter school. Most people recognize the challenges children face in our cities, but this report clearly demonstrates that conditions can be even worse for children living in rural communities."

PPC is a children's advocacy organization that works to advance government policies to improve the health, early education and well-being of Pennsylvania's children.

The organization issues the report every two years as part of its efforts to focus attention on the challenges facing Pennsylvania children and families, including access to health coverage, early childhood education, high-quality basic education, family supports, af- ter-school programs and youth development.

Eight of Schuylkill County's 12 school districts had more than 40 percent of their fifth-graders score below proficient in math, the 2004 report shows.

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"Schuylkill County children encounter hardships every day, and from the start it can limit their chances for success," said Mary Ann Devlin, director of Child Development Inc., Orwigsburg. "When we let hardships wear on them, year after year, the effects only multiply. It shows in their school achievement, and it limits their lifetime potential. Instead, our state policies and local programs should help children succeed despite the obstacles they face."

Up to 14 percent of Pennsylvania's children are commonly born under conditions that, according to the National Academy of Sciences, limit their chances of school readiness.

"Years of scholarly research from respected institutions such as the National Academies of Sciences tell us that children born in poverty, or to mothers who lack a high school education or who are very young will have a hard time succeeding," Benso said. "And those children may not ever get the chance to succeed unless Pennsylvania invests in the programs kids need to get ready for school, achieve in school and build on the supports they get in their homes and communities."

Statewide:

- One child in three lives in a low-income family, and for rural counties like Schuylkill County, the rate is higher.
- One child in seven is born to a mother who lacks a high school diploma, one child in 11 is born to a mother under age 20 and one child in 12 is born at a low birth weight.
- Two children out of three have all available parents in the labor force and are more likely to have poor quality child care or unsupervised time alone.

"Statistics like this show even more the necessity for quality after-school programs," said Barbara Butensky, program coordinator of the 21st Century Community Learning Center program.

Schuylkill Intermediate Unit 29 is currently in a consortium with Mahanoy Area, Saint Clair Area and Shenandoah Valley school districts to provide after-school programs for district students in grades five through eight.

These districts were chosen to launch the pilot program because they were identified as having the most students in at-risk, low-income families, determined by state academic proficiency tests and the number of students enrolled in the district's free lunch program.

The programs were initially funded by a 21st Century Community Learning Center grant awarded in January 2001, but those funds are almost depleted.

Future funding for after-school programs is available through the state's grant program, but those funds have not yet been secured so the future of the county's after-school program is uncertain.

Butensky said she is still waiting to hear if the grant was approved so that the program can resume this fall.

"The 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program is needed because it provides a safe haven for students whose parents work outside the home," Butensky said. "It also provides academic assistance for students who have not achieved proficiency on the PSSA tests, life skills training and prevention programs, cultural activities and physical education, which is currently a



national concern due to the large number of obese children in our country."

In Schuylkill County, among the 31,400 children ages 17 and under:

- One in 13 is born without prenatal care.
- One in 16 is born at low birth weight.
- One in 10 is born to mothers who are under the age of 20.
- One in six is born to mothers who lack a high school education.


The PPC report offers a blueprint for policymakers and provides detailed data that underscores the challenges facing the state in ensuring children are provided with the tools they need to succeed in life, Benso said.

Initiatives for change include a renewed focus on efforts to make sure that all children have access to quality health care coverage that meets their needs, establishing effective after-school and youth development programs, and ensuring that children are receiving a high-quality public education.

"Children aren't a commodity, no matter how often we refer to them as our future," Benso added. "We know what they need at every phase of their lives, and when those needs aren't met — when circumstances deny them basic opportunities to succeed — we should step up and provide them."

A full summary of the PPC report including a demographic breakdown by county, major municipality and school district is available on CD-ROM and can be ordered by contacting [www.papartnerships.org](http://www.papartnerships.org) or calling PPC at 1-800-257-2030.

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