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*From The Morning Call*

## Group urges more child health, activity aid

### Lehigh County stats are slightly worse than state averages.

By Dan Hartzell  
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One Lehigh County child in six is born to a mother without a high school diploma, and one in 10 is born to a mom under 20 — slightly higher rates than the Pennsylvania averages, according to a new study.

The Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children also reported the comparable figures in Northampton County are one child in seven, and one in 13, respectively. The state averages are one in seven and one in 11.

One-third of Pennsylvania's children rely on government funding for health insurance and half of rural children living in low-income families, according to the study.

The sobering report officially released today by the nonprofit advocacy group recommends greater public "investments" in kindergarten and other early-childhood education initiatives, children's health care, family-support programs, after-school and summer activities and youth development programs.

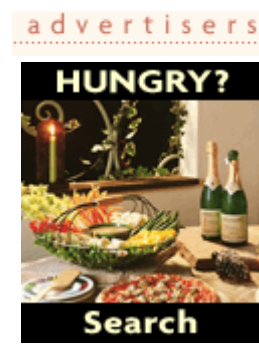
Though the fact that one-third of the state's children need government-supported health care might appear daunting, Partnerships President Joan L. Benso said there's also a bright side to the statistic: State officials have made great strides in recent years providing coverage for poor children, chiefly through Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program, she said.

"The CHIP program is a model for other states built," Benso said, adding that, with the bipartisan cooperation of elected officials, similar strides can be made to help reduce other effects of child poverty.

Among the organization's specific recommendations are voluntary home-visitation support programs for first-time mothers, pre-kindergarten early-childhood education programs, state-funded full-day kindergarten and reduced class sizes, Benso said.

The report also reiterates the oft-cited but contentious recommendation that the state boost its share of public school funding, which has declined from 55 percent to less than 37 percent of overall public education spending in the past three decades, according to the organization.

The 2004 report — the group issues one about every other year — also notes that rural poverty is more prevalent and persistent than many residents might think.



"In the dominant public image, poverty has an urban face," the report states. "But take the city out of the county, and poverty still reigns in surrounding communities" in counties including Allegheny (home to Pittsburgh), Dauphin (Harrisburg) and Lackawanna (Scranton).

But the poverty rates do tend to be more concentrated in Allentown and Easton, compared to the rest of Lehigh and Northampton counties, respectively, according to a statistical breakdown provided by Partnerships spokeswoman M. Diane McCormick.

One in two Allentown children live in poverty (\$18,850 annual income for a family of four), but only one in six outside the city do. The rate also is one in two for Easton, and one in five for the rest of the county, McCormick said.

Edward F. Meehan, chairman of the Allentown School District Community Council, strongly endorsed the report's recommendations.

"Sometimes we think of education issues in isolation from community development ... and quality of life," he said. "It's really important for us to do everything we can to make sure all our young families have the opportunity to participate ... and contribute" to society in a positive way.

For more information on Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children or the report, contact the Harrisburg organization at 1-800-257-2030, or log on to [www.papartnerships.org](http://www.papartnerships.org).

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